UNESCO the Courier

the Courier

January 1999

Gearing up for the granny boom

Shanghai reborn

Soils in torment

Museums hoist their new colours

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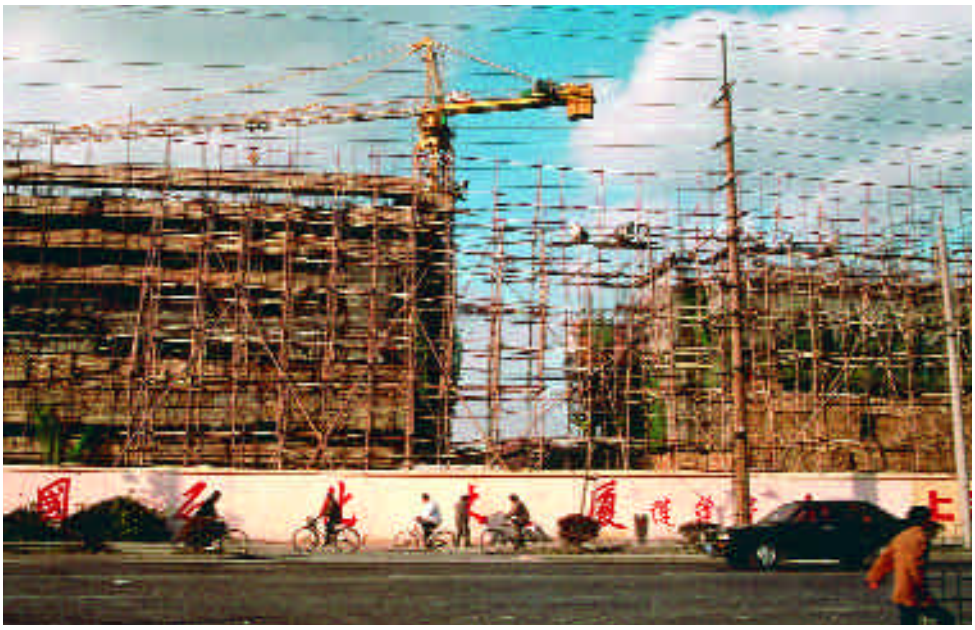
Shanghai reborn

Photos by
Georgi Pinkhasov

© G. Pinkhasov/Magnum, Paris

▲ Thronged with pedestrians and traffic, Nanjing Road is one of booming Shanghai's main thoroughfares.



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◀ Shanghai today is an immense building site bristling with cranes and scaffolding.

© G. Pinkhassov/Magnum, Paris

◀ A night out in a disco.

© G. Pinkhassov/Magnum, Paris

▲ Shanghai girls prepare for a white wedding.

Night-time on the Bund, the famous waterfront promenade built by the colonial powers a century ago. ▶

▼ Shopping fever takes hold of the city.

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Shanghai was once a colonial gateway into China, then went into eclipse. Today it is a vast building site bidding to rise as high as New York

Chen Danyan*

In the nineties, Shanghai has exploded like a Chinese firecracker. Yet this is not its first explosive boom. That occurred some 80 years ago. Shanghai used to be a small fishing port carved into British, French, American and Japanese spheres of influence. While it was carved up, Shanghai grew into the largest metropolis in Asia. In the seventies, Shanghai lost its lustre. When night fell, the city was dark as the corridors and toilets in many homes which were dimly lit by the 30-watt energy-saving bulbs then popular across the city. The river banks were dotted with courting couples who had no rooms of their own and no cafés or parks to go to. The riverside became the only place where they could meet.

Today Shanghai, like a "prodigal son", is working frantically to make up for whatever time it has wasted, harbouring an ambition to overtake Hong Kong in its development and to emulate New York or other big cities of the world.

In the old parts of the city, houses can be seen on all sides with the same big sign: "To be demolished". Whole neighbourhoods have been pulled down, and where a wall still remains one can tell by the blotches and stains on it that here stood a dining table and there a low bed in which someone must have sat reading ►

* Shanghai-based Chinese writer.

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with his greasy head against the wall. Old buildings of the colonial period are being levelled one after another at night by blasting, to be replaced by skyscrapers with glass outer walls. In the downtown area, an overhead highway and a subway are being built simultaneously, and the whole city resounds at night with thudding piledrivers at work. If the weather happens to be dry for a couple of days, the trees along the streets will be covered with dust. Some say Shanghai is simply a giant construction site; others say it looks as if it had just survived an indiscriminate bombing. People who have been away from a particular area for a few months are apt to lose their way when they come back, and this has been an experience shared by many old dwellers of the city. People tend to complain about taxi drivers making detours to cheat their customers without realizing that they too are constantly trying to find their way. The city map of Shanghai has to be updated every three months.

Huge German supermarkets have started to trade in Shanghai. So have big Japanese department stores, luxury shops from New York's Fifth Avenue and Haagen Dazs ice-cream parlours. Many other commodities have found their way to Shanghai as well, such as Shell petrol, French perfume, Swiss chocolate and Philips electrical appliances. There are also Irish pubs, Kobe style cafés, Bordeaux wine shops, hard rock bars and even Tex-Mex restaurants, now very much in vogue in Europe. After long years of impoverishment, people in Shanghai, infused with an urge for material possession, are now rushing in all directions into shops, real estate agencies, banks and all other places where money can be made and spent.

In the streets, pedestrians vie for passage with motor vehicles: shoddy taxis converted from 125cc *Happiness* brand motorcycles, air-conditioned coaches, swarms of motorized pedicabs ferrying first-grade pupils and trailing black smoke behind them, shaky push carts full of construction debris, and imported Cadillacs belonging to foreign businessmen. In the narrow streets built in the twenties, people and cars go busily on their way. This is Shanghai today. ■

© G. Pinkhassov/Magnum, Paris

◀ Street scene in the Pudong district, the city's new financial and commercial centre.

Lunch break in Huangpu park. ▼

© G. Pinkhassov/Magnum, Paris

◀ Occupants of old Shanghai move on as their homes are demolished.

© G. Pinkhassov/Magnum, Paris

▲ Pedestrians, cyclists and motor traffic on Waibadu bridge.

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▲ **Twilight in the old city.**

An economic **powerhouse**

Shanghai is the beacon of the liberalized Chinese economy and the symbol of its opening up to the world of international business. Reform has been speedier and more radical there than anywhere else in China, and more foreign capital and state-of-the-art technology is pouring into Shanghai than into any other Chinese city.

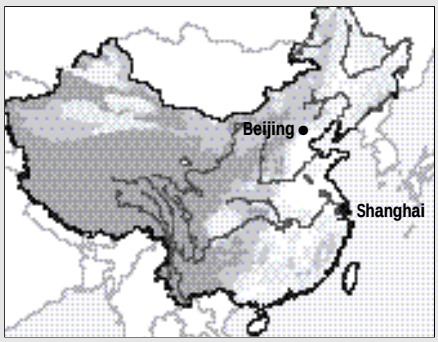
Situated at the mouth of the Yangtze river, Shanghai is China's most populous conurbation, with 13 million inhabitants. It comprises the city itself (375 sq. km.) and a dozen satellite towns in a quadrilateral measuring 120 km (north-south) by 100 km (east-west).

At the start of the 19th century, it already had half a million inhabitants. It then became the main port of entry for colonial powers seeking to penetrate the Chinese Empire. To some extent it became a backwater after the communists took power in 1949 and did not start prospering again until it was declared a "special economic zone" in the early 1990s.

The city's economy is run by a local council which reports directly to the central government. It grew by 14 per cent a year between 1992 and 1996, easing off to 12.7 per cent in 1997. Foreign direct investment was running at around $10 billion a year during the same period. The average wage has tripled since 1990 and annual per capita income is now over $3,000, compared with only $860 for the rest of China (1997).

The city's pride is its heavy industry (steelworks, electric power stations, refineries and shipyards), machine-tool factories, computer plants, textile mills, port activity and especially finance—the Shanghai stock exchange, Pudong, is China's equivalent of Wall Street.

But the effects of the Asian economic crisis are beginning to be felt. Annual growth has dropped below 10 per cent and foreign direct investment fell by almost half in 1997. Restructuring of state-owned firms, in the form of mergers or shutdowns, has pushed up unemployment, which is officially between 7 and 8 per cent but is thought to be double that. Air and water pollution and poor waste disposal are also causing concern. ■



A time for **hope**

Unesco/James Forbes

Federico Mayor

The International Year for the Culture of Peace proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations will begin at the end of this year. Now is the time to start preparing to take part

We must say all together: enough is enough! Let us draw new hope from the turbulent history of the twentieth century. Through non-violent rebellion, creative resistance and refusal to accept the unacceptable, let us take steps to ease the transition to dialogue, tolerance and reasoned consideration of that which divides us, and invent imaginative solutions.

In twelve months we enter the year 2000:what better time to chart a new course,by working together every day to make possible a new society of peace,a society based upon the democratic ideals enshrined in UNESCO's Constitution: liberty, justice, equality and solidarity?

There can be no lasting peace without sustainable development. There can be no development without lifelong education, without democracy, the sharing of resources to avoid the immense disparities separating the developed from the less developed countries. Within every country, some citizens want for nothing, while others lack almost everything.

The century that is drawing to a close has seen great discoveries and inventions, of which antibiotics and telecommunications are but two, but the logic of force has prevailed at a terrible cost—the lives of millions of human beings, many of them in the flower of their youth.Nothing of value has ever been achieved by violence and coercion.

We cannot continue to be indifferent to the wasting of our resources in the production of weapons to be used against enemies, whether actual or potential.We cannot tolerate the fact that, for economic reasons, thousands of helpless children are victims of sexual abuse or exploitation at work. We cannot continue to allow water to be polluted, forests to be destroyed,the air of our planet to be contaminated.We cannot accept the predominance of one culture over all others; nor can we afford to lose the diversity of the physical and spiritual heritage that we must pass on to future generations.

We must say all together: enough is enough! Let us draw new hope from the turbulent history of the twentieth century. Through non-violent rebellion, creative resistance and refusal to accept the unacceptable, let us take steps to ease the transition to dialogue, tolerance and reasoned consideration of that which divides us, and invent imaginative solutions.

The Nobel Peace laureates,with UNESCO and the United Nations,have launched an international appeal to transform the culture of war and violence into a culture of peace and reconciliation.This initiative demands the participation of everyone,within families, communities, nations and regions, and offers values that can inspire young people and future generations to shape a world of justice,solidarity, liberty and prosperity.

Let us all, children, young people, women and men of all ages, unite around this manifesto and create a global movement for a culture of peace and non-violence. Let us make our voices heard by decision-makers,parliamentarians,mayors. Let us make full use of the media to arouse the conscience and commitment of the world, working, giving, sharing, reducing the distances that have divided us,healing the wounds that have given us pain.

Let us dare to take up the challenge and fashion together this new future, and start right away to prepare for the year 2000,the International Year for the Culture of Peace. ■

Soils in

The earth's thin coat of soil, which helps to feed us and is vital for planetary ecosystems and climatic balance, is becoming increasingly threadbare

Soil erosion in Burkina Faso.

"We drink water, we breathe air, but we don't eat soil. It feeds us only indirectly," says Austrian pedologist (soil expert) Winfried Blum, secretary-general of the International Union of Soil Science (IUSS). Soils, he says, are the forgotten part of the environment. Like most of his colleagues, he thinks it's high time the situation changed. "We have to make people realize we're destroying the basis of all our lives," he says.

There are no regularly updated statistics, and the rate and extent at which soils are deteriorating are a matter of debate. The French Scientific Research Institute for Development in Co-operation (ORSTOM) notes that estimates in any one region can vary as much as 100 per cent.

Damaging human activity

In Africa, soil deterioration statistics are particularly exaggerated because they are linked to desertification. But in countries south of the Sahara, the soil is not necessarily degraded. Desertification may be the result of a series of years of drought, says Alain Ruellan, former president of the IUSS. "Sometimes all it needs is some rain and some farmers to bring it back to life."

But scientists are virtually unanimous about one thing: human activity is increasingly damaging soils all over the world. Soils constitute a fragile living environment which teems with biological and physiochemical processes. They become degraded when erosion carries them towards rivers and the sea faster than they can regenerate themselves naturally. Soils also become exhausted when they cannot renew themselves, either naturally or as a result of external inputs such as manure.

Soil erosion worldwide affects an area the size of the United Kingdom—more than 200,000 sq. km., says Blum. "But erosion is not the main problem," says Ruellan, who stresses the importance of compaction, which modifies soils' biological activity and the circulation of water. Data gathered by the Netherlands-based International Soil Reference and Information Centre (ISRIC) are disturbing. The Centre says erosion now affects more than 20 million sq. km. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), at least 12 million of them (an area bigger than China) have been damaged by human activity in the past half century. Overgrazing by animals is reckoned to have damaged 6.8 million sq. km. (including 2.4 million in Africa and 2 million in Asia) and deforestation almost 6 million sq.km.

Overgrazing and deforestation impoverish the soil by destroying barriers to erosion and depriving it of the organic matter which it normally gets through vegetation cover. In addition, poor farming methods have damaged 5.5 million sq. km. and collecting firewood 1.4 million. Expanding cities and industries have degraded several hundred thousand sq. km. of good soil. In the United States, 30,000 sq. km. of farmland were lost to urbanization, road construction and mining between 1967 and 1975.

Water and wind erosion

Things seem likely to get worse. FAO estimates that at the present rate of decay, 2.5 million sq. km. of farmland could become barren by the year 2050. ISRIC says water erosion is by far the most common cause of soil degradation, affecting about 11 million sq. km. After that comes wind erosion (5.5 million sq. km.) and the action of chemical products (2.4 million sq. km). Only 220,000 sq. km. of soil are thought to be damaged by pollution, almost 90 per cent of it in Europe.

In the last few decades, developing countries have followed the industrialized world by adopting more intensive farming methods. Brazil is a good example. Soil degradation began there four centuries ago, when Europeans arrived and deforestation began, says soil scientist José Pereira de Quieroz Neto. It gathered speed in the 19th century as coffee and sugar plantations spread, and since the 1970s the growth of export agro-industry has ravaged the environment. In just five years, between 1975 and 1980, Brazil rose to be the world's third biggest producer of soybeans after the United States and China. It also became one of the countries with the highest amounts of agro-toxins per hectare going into the soil.

"We switched from small subsistence

torment

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'Soil is a resource that must be protected and managed, like water, forests and the air. Its role in the environment should be valued more highly.'

What is soil?

Soil is the skin that coats the earth's surface. It may be only a few millimetres thick or several dozen metres. It covers two-thirds of the total land area but only 22 per cent of this (or 5.5 per cent of the earth's total surface) is suitable for farming.

Soil is formed from rocks which are broken down by the combined action of water, air, and animal and plant life.

"In the beginning," says French naturalist Yves Coineau, "there was just rock. Then lichens attached themselves to it, animals came and ate the lichens and dust accumulated. Then grass appeared and attacked part of the rock's surface with its roots. The plant created organic matter, which then decomposed and mixed in with the debris from the rock. Gradually, very slowly, a small layer of earth formed."

A centimetre of earth may take between 50 and 2,000 years to form, depending on the location. In other words it is not a rapidly renewable resource.

Soil is the least understood of the earth's major environments. "99 per cent of people, whether they're teachers or decision-makers, can't tell you what soil is," says Alain Ruellan, former president of the International Union of Soil Science (IUSS). It is hard to see soil. You have to make an effort to look at it, by bending down or digging holes. Above all, says Ruellan, "soil, the source of life, is identified with death, because bodies are buried in it." ■

farms to big highly-mechanized estates," says Pereira de Queiroz Neto. "Farm machinery sales rose 2,000 per cent between 1975 and 1995. All this threw the soil's biological structure and processes into confusion and increased soil erosion four or fivefold. Today, between 200 and 250 million tonnes of soil are lost each year in the state of São Paulo alone". Multiply that by 30 and you get a rough nationwide figure.

A reservoir of greenhouse gases

Up to now, soils have been mainly regarded, quite wrongly, as a basis for other activities, says Marc Latham, director of France's National Centre for Agronomic Studies of Hot Countries (CNEARC). Soil is a limited resource. "It's a resource that must be protected and managed, like water, forests and the air. Its role in the environment should be valued more highly." And that role is not a small one. The earth's surface is an enormous and fragile biological reactor which provides food for plants. It is also the home of most land animal species and ensures the quality of water, which is filtered as it passes through it. And it helps to create an overall climatic equilibrium.

Soils have recently entered into the scientific debate about global warming. "They are both a source and a sink for ▶

Ozone hole reaches **record** size

In 1998, the hole which forms each year in the Antarctic ozone layer during the southern hemisphere's springtime reached an all-time record size for the second half of September. Satellite pictures taken by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) showed that its area was 25 million sq. km.—about two and a half times the area of Europe (from the Atlantic to the Urals). The last biggest hole recorded in September was 22 million sq. km. in 1993.

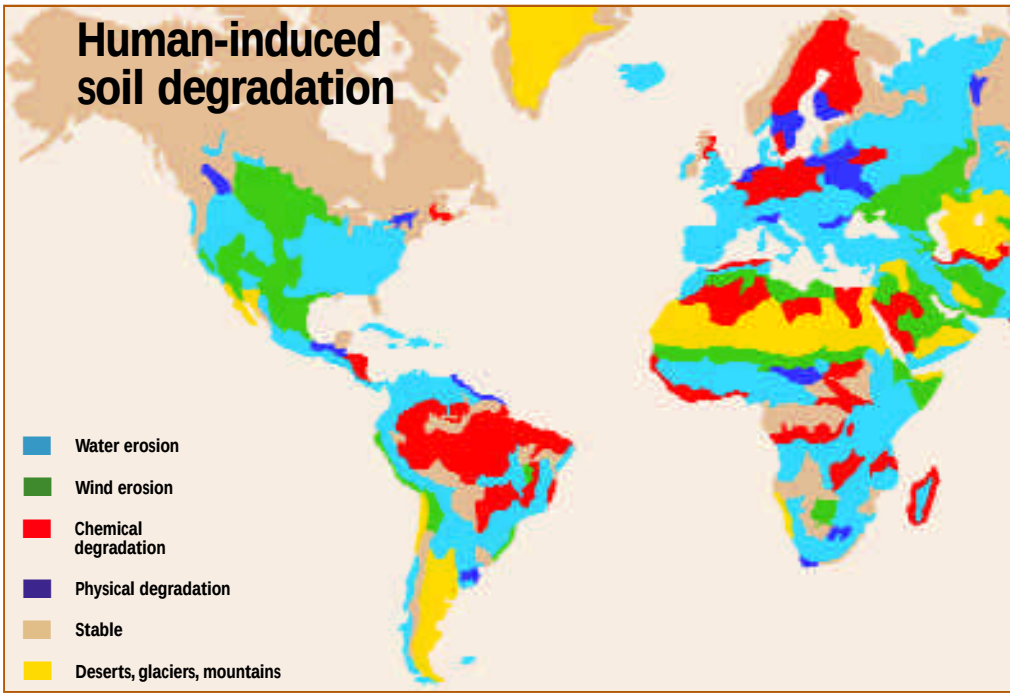
The ozone layer in the stratosphere protects humans, other living creatures and the world's ecosystems from the sun's ultra-violet radiation. The hole, which in September 1998 extended as far as the southern tip of Argentina and Chile, exposes people to greater risk of sunburn,skin cancer and cataracts.

The situation would have been even more serious if 165 countries had not pledged at a conference in Montreal in 1987 to gradually stop producing and using chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). These chemical compounds, which are used as refrigerants and aerosol propellants, are destroying the ozone layer and causing holes at the South Pole and (to a lesser extent) at the North Pole. The Montreal Protocol came into effect in 1995 for industrialized countries. Other nations must get in line with it by the year 2005 but have been asked to do so earlier if possible. It will take at least 60 years for CFCs to disappear completely from the stratosphere.

Some experts say the recent widening of the hole above the Antarctic may be due to the exceptional cold—up to minus 90° C—in the stratosphere during the southern hemisphere's winter. The very low temperatures help form polar clouds which also destroy the ozone layer.

Three researchers at the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)'s Goddard Institute for Space Studies say the unusual cold is partly due to the emission of greenhouse gases. These warm the lower reaches of the atmosphere, they say, but cool the stratosphere, which is between 12 and 27 km. above the earth.

The 150 or so balloons which will be launched into the stratosphere above the Antarctic starting in October 2000 as part of the international Stratéole programme should provide more information about the factors involved in the hole's highly complicated chemistry. ■



The **squeeze** on good earth

Is soil degradation a threat to our food supply? At first glance, it doesn't seem so: only half the world's arable land is being farmed. But this can give a false sense of security. There's no point in having good soils if you can't use them, and rich soil is often in places where there is no water and where there are no people to farm it.

In the Middle East and in south and east Asia, where population pressures are strong, there is no virgin land left to farm, so the danger of soil degradation is growing. In the Amazon,in Siberia and in some parts of Africa, such as Zaire, there is a lot of virgin land but hardly anyone to farm it.

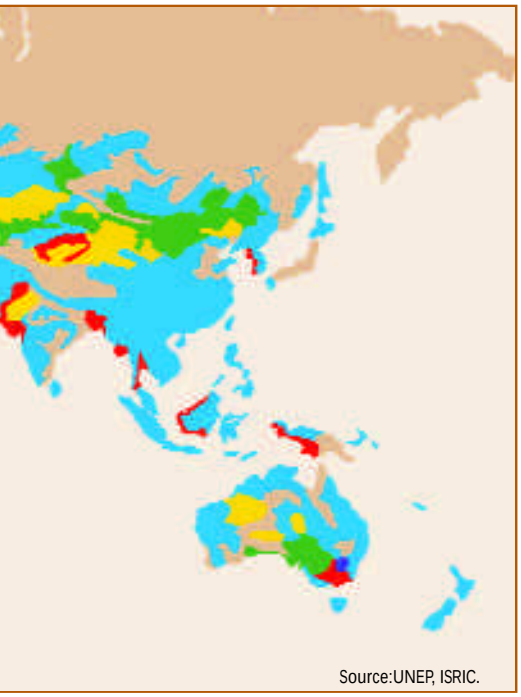
To bridge this gap between supply and demand, some countries have tried to resettle people, but such efforts have usually been spectacular failures. "Farmers have ended up begging in city streets," says Algerian soil scientist Rabah Lahmar. In his recent book, *Des sols et des hommes* ("Soil and People"), he describes a disastrous experiment in Indonesia, where the government sent people from Java to Borneo to clear the land and start up farms.

What can be done about fertile land where there is no water? The problem is a serious one:the world's irrigated areas are only increasing by 1 per cent each year. In the 1960s and 1970s, they were growing by 10 per cent a year.

The cocktail of population growth and soil degradation could become explosive and lead to countless conflicts over good land. The demand for food is going to grow, while availability of farmland per capita in poor countries is expected to halve by the year 2010, according to FAO—from 0.85 hectares per person to 0.4. ■

greenhouse gases," says Blum. Soil gives off large amounts of carbon dioxide.When human activity causes erosion or soil loss, the soil is no longer deep or rich enough to store carbon, and carbon dioxide is either released into the atmosphere or carried directly to the sea. Soil is also responsible for a third of all methane emissions, especially in rice-growing areas in the tropics. In addition, it produces 70 per cent of nitrous oxide emissions in intensively-farmed regions where large quantities of nitrous fertilizers are used.

Soils are also a fabulous reservoir of greenhouse gases. They contain two and a half times more carbon, in organic matter (humus and biomass), than all the vegetation on the planet, says Blum. The amount of carbon in the soil varies widely. Desert soil, which has between 0.1 per cent



Source:UNEP, ISRIC.

and 0.2 per cent of organic matter, traps much less of it than forest soil (2-8 per cent organic matter) or peat bog, which is up to 90 per cent organic matter.

The still-unanswered question is whether soils absorb more greenhouse gas than they produce. In other words, can they fix and store the amount of excess carbon dioxide which is produced by human activity and is causing global warming? "It depends a lot on local conditions," says Blum. "The best soils for this are deep ones beneath forests in temperate parts of Europe and in some tropical regions." Stocks of carbon can also be renewed by massive reforestation, with priority going to regions which have been damaged and made unfit for agriculture.

The effect of global warming on soils is also very hard to figure out. The Sahara Desert is undoubtedly going to spread, scientists say. But at the same time, huge land areas near the poles will thaw as ice melts. In a few decades time, we might be able to grow wheat in northern Canada and Siberia. ■

Sophie Boukhari

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  Internet: www.fao.org

First steps to a world soil **convention**

"Considering the centuries or millennia required for soil formation, it is important not to allow valuable time to pass but to move rapidly towards the sustainable use of soils. Therefore it is of paramount importance to expand the Convention on Desertification into a comprehensive Soil Convention for the sustainable use of soils worldwide." The scientists who wrote this passage, taken from the introduction to a recent proposal for a convention on the sustainable use of soils, did not mince their words. The convention on desertification, which was adopted at the Rio Earth Summit in June 1992 and came into effect in December 1996, is weak. The "convention for Africa", as it was once nicknamed, only applies to arid or semi-arid regions. It is only a step. "Desertification is a localized problem, but soil degradation affects the whole planet," says Alain Ruellan, former president of the International Union of Soil Science (IUSS).

So the scientists got down to work. A preliminary text was published in July 1998 by the founders of the Tutzing "Time Ecology" project, based at the Evangelical Academy in Tutzing, a southern suburb of Munich (Germany). The idea had been in the air since the Rio conference, says Martin Held, leader of the multidisciplinary project. "Then leading environmental experts like David Pimentel of Cornell University (New York state) and Hartmut Grassl, head of the World Climate Research Programme, asked us to draft the text of a convention," he says.

At a meeting held in Tutzing from 22-25 November 1998, the IUSS was mandated to conduct extensive international consultations about the text, especially among all those who use the soil, such as farmers, urban planners and NGOs. So the process towards final United Nations adoption of a convention has only just begun. If it lasts as long as that leading to adoption of the convention on desertification, the new treaty might get off the ground around the year 2015. ■

Industry asked to **clean up** its act

In 1998, Environics International, a private institute in Toronto (Canada), co-ordinated for the second year running a worldwide survey examining attitudes towards environmental issues. The latest poll focused on the average citizen's expectations in regard to corporate and government commitment to protecting the environment. During the first quarter of 1998, 34,475 people were surveyed in 30 countries[1] on five continents representing 68 per cent of the world's population. In 19 of the 30 countries concerned, most people polled considered that business and industry do not make a big effort to ensure a clean environment. The highest rates of those who believe companies are not doing enough to curb pollution are from Greece (88 per cent of those polled), Argentina (76 per cent), Turkey (73 per cent) and Russia (72 per cent). The lowest rates are in Germany and Indonesia (39 per cent), China (36 per cent) and South Africa (35 per cent).

People want governments to do more about the situation. In all the countries except Finland, Nigeria and Indonesia, over 50 per cent of those polled said they believe that existing regulations do not go far enough or are extremely inadequate.

Should other alternatives be tried to compel companies and industries to pollute less or not at all? The idea of increasing financial incentives for "clean" companies or granting them tax breaks is considered a good one in the United States, Canada, Germany and France. The Japanese, Colombians and Finns prefer publishing pollution statistics to embarrass offending companies into cleaning up their acts. The 1997 survey revealed that, in the 24 countries where the poll was taken, sensitiveness to environmental issues ran very high—70 to 90 per cent of those polled said they were very or fairly concerned, including in developing nations. ■

1. Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Nigeria, New Zealand, Poland, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom, Uruguay, United States and Venezuela.

Building blocks of

In a world of cut-throat competition, Denmark is a European leader in worker training and education. The LEGO group offers its employees courses that are not directly related to their jobs in a bid to educate 'the whole person'

"Danish industries are way ahead of industries in other European countries when it comes to training and upgrading the skills of employees," says Christian Braad, a consultant at the Educational Department of the Confederation of Danish Industries.

In a labour force survey carried out in 1996 by Eurostat, the European Union Statistics Office, more than 8 million Europeans over 30 years of age were asked whether they had received any kind of teaching or training in the four weeks preceding the interview. Denmark came out on top with around 12 per cent of respondees answering "yes", more than three times the EU average.

"And we are not resting on our laurels," Braad continues. "Education is increasingly becoming a focus area for both small and large companies. Whereas opportunities for education once went mainly to employees in high positions and skilled workers, there is now a marked trend for unskilled workers to be offered—or even required to attend—various kinds of educational courses. With increasing globalization companies have to be flexible, and so does the workforce."

Braad adds that the flexible and independent, but government-subsidized, Danish system of skills training centres is an indispensable tool to achieve this. The system was introduced in the 1960s to offer short courses for workers as a response to increasing use of technology and demand for qualified labour. Later, other kinds of adult education were available, focusing more on "soft" issues not directly related to specific job skills.

© The LEGO Group, Billund

Danish workers are three times more likely to have access to education and training than workers elsewhere in Europe.

"The system can accommodate the special needs of individual companies," Braad says, "and at the same time offer general training and education which is not job- or company-specific. In the short term companies may complain that their employees are taught things that they cannot directly use in their present job. On the other hand it increases the mobility of the workforce, and this is important for Danish industries in general."

Two reasons are cited to explain why "soft" courses which seek to educate "the whole person" are increasingly used by big Danish companies and why employees are encouraged to take them. One is the need for a more widely educated workforce as a result of the general trend to delegate powers to floor level—to replace foremen with self-governing groups. The other is an increased focus on quality control as the responsibility of each individual rather than of outside controllers.

Education is a priority for small and large businessses—and their workforce—as they adapt to globalization

Right from the start the Danish government subsidized workers attending training courses. Today it pays around 70 per cent of an employee's salary while he or she is on a course; the employer pays the rest. In some cases the government even refunds the topping up of the salary.

Education for unskilled workers

Most Danish companies make use of the system, but some big companies have taken the lead in developing new kinds of courses. One of them is the LEGO group, a toy-manufacturing firm which employs close on 10,000 people worldwide. The success of LEGO, a term formed from the Danish words "Leg Godt" ("play well"), has been largely built on 8-studded plastic bricks, each measuring just under 5 cm^3, which can be pressed together and assembled into a wide range of toy constructions. Some 189 billion of them were moulded between 1949 and the end of 1997. The company has a workforce of 4,300 at the bustling town of Billund, where LEGO was founded in 1932.

In 1987 LEGO set up its own

learning

educational department and increasingly focused on unskilled workers and soft courses on such subjects as "Preparing yourself for education","Improving basic reading and writing skills", English, information technology, management and team building. LEGO employees are encouraged to take courses both during work-time and during their time off, that do not necessarily have any relevance to their jobs. Around 1,500 people have taken part in the courses since 1995. Although there are no statistics to prove it, LEGO feels sure that the courses have a positive impact on job satisfaction and productivity.

"In a fast changing world,what you did yesterday will not suffice tomorrow," says Kurt Aulbjerg, head of LEGO's human resource development department. "Traditional skills-upgrading courses are not sufficient. Our approach to education has to be much more broadminded."

In other words, the LEGO group cannot afford only to make use of the hands of its employees. The company wants the whole person.

Poul Erik Petersen, a metal worker and shop steward for 150 metal workers, went on a personality course. He started off feeling sceptical.

© The LEGO Group, Billund

The LEGO group has had its own educational department since 1987.

"I have been on several job-related courses to upgrade special skills," Petersen says, "and nobody questions the relevance of this kind of education. Since becoming a shop steward two years ago, I have also attended a six-week course laid on by my trade union. But being on a course that focuses on your personality rather than your professional skills is quite another story. All of a sudden you are being questioned about what you do when you are off the job. Do you have skills, experiences or talents that can make you perform better at work?"

Petersen cites the case of a young secretary who had to get a signature from her superior for every piece of expenditure she endorsed from her department, no matter how small. "During a course she mentioned that she was the treasurer of a big sports association and responsible for an annual budget of around $40,000.As a consequence she was given more responsibility in her daily work, thus relieving her superior of simple duties and increasing her own job satisfaction."

Even unskilled workers must be capable of taking responsibilities.

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Made-to-measure training courses

Petersen is in favour of a flexible approach whereby each employee can more or less design his or her own educational plan. "With so many people from very different backgrounds, you cannot make the same courses compulsory for everyone," he says. "That would have a negative impact on motivation. We have to realize that people who have worked here for many years,who joined us immediately after school, and who have been used to taking orders,may not be ▶

prepared for change, to take responsibility and become students again." On the other hand, Petersen adds, "all employees must prepare themselves for this. Otherwise we will lose out to other countries."

Benny Petersen, a shop steward representing 70 unskilled workers, agrees. "Life—and working life in particular—has become a process of ongoing education," he says. He joined the LEGO group 20 years ago, and he has lost track of the number of courses he has attended since then. In his opinion one of the best courses is the one-week course on "Preparing yourself for education".

"It may not look very relevant to most workers and I have met quite a few who were very sceptical beforehand," he says. "But to me it shows that 'soft issues' like psychology are as relevant and important as hard skills."

The LEGO group makes wide use of local education institutions, using their regular courses as well as courses specially designed for its employees. "We are extremely fortunate in that Denmark has this highly developed system of skills training centres and other educational institutions that offer a variety of courses that are flexible to the needs of local business," explains Aulbjerg.

"Representatives of local municipalities and counties sit on the boards of these institutions, and trade unions and employers' associations are also represented. This ensures a very close dialogue between the institutions and local companies and enables the institutions to respond very quickly to local needs. If the LEGO group starts up a new production facility in a region, we talk with the local schools and can have special courses designed to meet our needs."

"This benefits both the employer and the employee," Poul Erik Petersen says. "In fact, it can also be used as a means to achieve job security. The LEGO group and most other big companies have peak periods every year, but also periods with less work. During off-peak periods employees are often laid off or moved to other departments. With good planning these periods can be used for courses, which—again—is to the benefit of all of us."

But Aulbjerg emphasizes that the government subsidy is not the driving force behind his company's education policy. "It is based on our needs and priorities," he says, "and in some cases we have declined subsidies that we were entitled to." ■

Jesper Heldgaard

Skills gaps in the **workforce**

Adult education used to be a luxury, but today it has become an imperative, especially in commercial companies.

In a "knowledge economy", competitivity depends on "human resources" yet skills gaps are glaringly apparent in much of the labour force. The US government's adult education department, for example, reckons that almost half of American workers are "at risk", in the sense that they don't have the necessary educational base to be trained in areas where jobs will be opening up in the next 20 years.

But the pressure is on for short-term profitability. As a result, the first to be trained are, paradoxically, companies' best-qualified, most reliable workers, who also tend to be men. Those on temporary or part-time contracts are pretty much left out in the cold. A study carried out by UNESCO's International Institute for Education (UIE) in Hamburg says a "dual learning society" is emerging and "the skills gap" is widening.

The available training facilities are clearly insufficient and too often inaccessible. According to the UIE study, carried out in six industrialized countries, between 14 and 43 per cent of adults had spent at least six hours in training during the previous year. Between a third and a half of them paid for training out of their own pocket, despite the fact that big firms in industrialized countries spend between one and five per cent of their permanent wage bill on such training. Government aid is negligible and, according to the study, comprises less than 20 per cent of all adult training budgets.

The second big problem is that links between this form of training and traditional education methods leave much to be desired and prevent the development of joint efforts in the field.

In developing countries, such training obviously does not reach the huge informal sector. But, especially in big companies, there is more and more training. ■

When schools **fall down** on the job

Primary school enrolment is steadily growing around the world, including in developing countries, where the number of pupils rose from 305 million (77 per cent of all school-age children) in 1970 to nearly 561 million (86 per cent) in 1995. It is increasing faster than the population in most countries except in sub-Saharan Africa, where the number of children out of school grew by 12 million between 1985 and 1995.

The numbers speak for themselves, but what about the quality of education provided? The question is an urgent one. Going to school is one thing, graduating from it is another. In the industrialized countries, 99 per cent of children completed primary school in 1994-95, but only just over half managed to do so in the least developed countries. In the developing world as a whole, only three out of four children finish primary school and can read.

What about the rest? A study done in China showed that nearly half the children in rural areas who drop out of primary school work on farms and that 7.5 per cent have part-time jobs, a figure which rises to more than 27 per cent among their urban counterparts. Both in urban and rural areas, more than a third of children stay at home.

Some 250 million children aged from five to 14 in developing countries are forced to earn a living and half of them combine work, school and other unpaid activities. Three-fifths of all child workers live in Asia and a third in Africa. Paid work is both the cause and the result of dropping out of school, which remains one of the biggest problems of basic education.

A new UNESCO report entitled Wasted Opportunities: When Schools Fail looks at the problem of wastage in the school system and gives many examples of original steps being taken to stop it. ■

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Gearing up for the granny

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"A society for all ages" is the slogan of the International Year of Older Persons, which the General Assembly of the United Nations has decided to observe in 1999.

In taking this decision, the General Assembly wanted to draw attention to the extent and implications of the "longevity revolution". The "granny and grandad boom"—especially the granny boom, since on average women live longer than men—is becoming a virtually universal phenomenon. Worldwide, the number of persons aged 65 and over will have increased fourfold between 1955 and 2025, and their percentage of the total population will have doubled (from 5.3 per cent in 1965 to 10 per cent in 2025).

In the more developed countries, where one person in five will be elderly, traditional policies towards aging are running out of steam, and two major social advances—the lowering of the retirement age and publicly financed pension schemes—are being widely contested.The problem is even more acute in the developing countries, where three-quarters of the world's older people will be living 25 years from now. States are not providing care, traditional family structures are breaking down, and private mutual aid schemes are few and far between.As yet, however, no moves have been made in these countries to defuse this demographic time-bomb.

There is a big risk that a kind of apartheid may develop between older people and a working population which would regard the elderly as an economic burden. Elderly people should not be segregated in this way by ageism.They must have opportunities to use their availability, their experience, their talents and their generosity in exchange for the solidarity they have the right to expect. It is through this kind of give-and-take that the world's "greying" societies will be able to maintain or rediscover their unity. ■

The longevity

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In the coming century the human life span may rise as high as 120 years. What are the implications of an aging world?

Over the past hundred years a silent and unprecedented revolution in longevity has occurred: people living in the industrialized world have on average gained 25 years of life, thanks largely to reduction of deaths at childbirth and infancy, and to control of diseases associated with old age. This is nearly equal to life expectancy advances over the preceding 5,000 years. In many countries, the 85-plus age group is the most rapidly growing.

The next century may bring even more dramatic increases. Prevention and elimination of disease along with control over the aging process itself could push our life spans from a world average of 66 years today to closer to 110 or 120 years—what scientists believe to be our "natural life span" because many individuals have lived that long. Some scientists talk of pushing the boundaries further by gaining control over the genes that determine longevity.

But our enhanced life spans do not come without a price. As the demographic balance increasingly tips to the elderly, societies are seeing their cultural, political and economic orders put to the test.

Among the most basic questions facing us are: At a time when the welfare state is coming under attack, who will be responsible for the financial support of the aged, the state or the individual? Will the aging of societies lead to economic stagnation? Will the aged form a politically powerful minority and if so, what demands will that group make? In

In extending our time on this planet, will we also be able to maintain quality of life?

extending our time on this planet, will we also be able to maintain quality of life, or are we doomed to pass our later years in sickness, frailty and financial incertitude? Culturally, will some of the attention now concentrated on youth shift to the elderly? As women outlive men in most of the industrialized world, many of the challenges associated with old age are particularly pertinent to them.

* The International Longevity Center-USA,New York

revolution

Robert Butler*

Our greater longevity has brought fundamental changes to our lives in ways that we either take for granted or of which we are hardly aware. For example, in 1920, a 10-year-old in the US only had a 40 per cent chance of having two of his or her possible four grandparents alive. Today, that figure is 80 per cent. Thus, despite romantic images of a tighter-knit family of former days, in fact, today we have a much greater proportion of multi-generational families than ever before.

In many ways, life is improving for the aged. For example, in the 1950s the average age of admissions into nursing homes was 65. Now the age is closer to 81. Today, older people in industrialized countries also have more choices about how they live: assisted living, home care or community-based care, for example. Morbidity rates are falling as a result of progress against heart disease and stroke.

'Silver industries' to cater for the over-50s

One of the most fundamental issues is how to support the aged financially. Different societies have come up with different approaches. Despite its current economic difficulties, Japan adheres to a system under which the state provides for institutional and home care of the elderly. The United States is leading the way in a profit-oriented, managed care system, which emphasizes primary care, disease prevention and monitoring of distribution. However, the US is not going far enough nor moving rapidly enough given the trajectory of old age. Meanwhile, the former Soviet Union has made major cutbacks in health care while slashing pension benefits as well.

So far much of our thinking about the aged has focused on them as a financial burden. But that attitude ignores fundamental facts that suggest to some extent that the very opposite is true. Today in the US pension funds amount to $2.7 trillion. This is money that helps provide capital for investment in production of goods and services, everything from roads to computer software start-ups. Overall, in the US, pension funds account for a quarter of all capital formation.

We must also remember that the aged represent an important group of consumers with very specific needs. Thus, in Japan, for example, a range of "silver industries" has grown up to cater to the housing, travel, recreation and other needs of those over 50. Similarly, in the United States companies talk increasingly about the senior or mature market. In recognition of the potential of this market, a number of publishers and electronic community builders have set up Internet web sites targeted at the aged, complete with advertisements aimed at winning their custom. Meanwhile, in attempting to add to their bottom lines, pharmaceuticals companies increasingly concentrate on needs of the elderly: in industrialized countries those over 65 constitute roughly 15 per cent of the population but account for some 30 per cent of pharmaceuticals used.

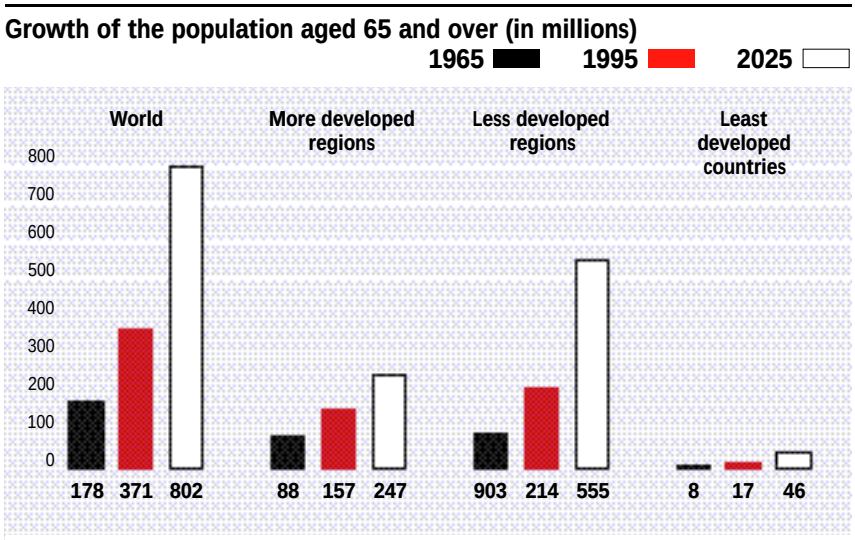
And the Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years.

Genesis VI, 3

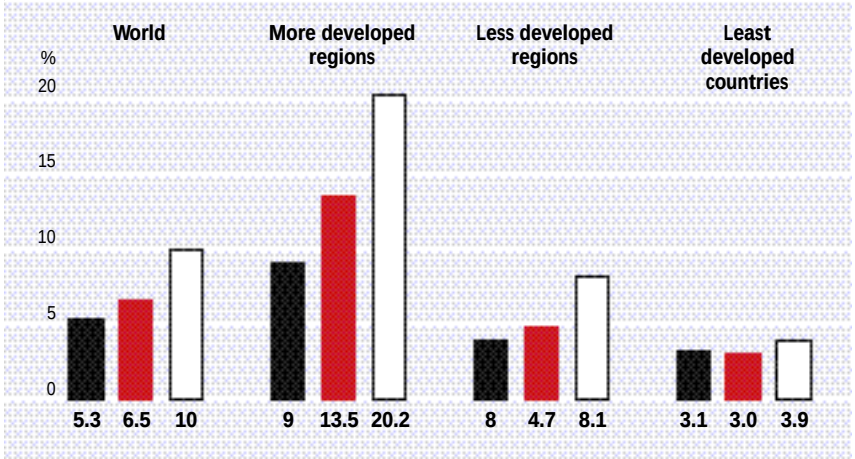
Politically, the elderly will become a more powerful group with whom political parties in democratic countries at least will have to reconcile their policies. In the US, for example, the "baby boomers," born between 1946 and 1964 will begin to retire in the year 2008. In the decade beginning from 2020, they will constitute 20 per cent of the US population and as much as 30 per cent of the electorate. Political candidates will no doubt have to pay increasing attention to their needs.

As societies struggle to address the challenges of aging populations, mere reorganization of the services to the elderly is no longer adequate. We require a ▶

Growth of the population aged 65 and over (in millions)



Growth of the population aged 65 and over as a percentage of total population



Sources: World Population Prospects - The 1996 Revision, New York, United Nations, 1998, and The Sex and Age Distribution of the World's Populations - The 1996 Revision, New York, United Nations, 1997.

redesign of the way we approach the needs of the elderly. In order for redesign to take place, some of our basic assumptions about the nature and character of old age must be questioned. This is already happening. Beginning in the 1950s, industrialized society began to perceive old age not as a period of life that is biologically fixed, but as one that is mutable.

The feel-good factor

There are a number of reasons for these changing views. For one, the self-image of the aged has been changing. Increasingly, they now see themselves as vibrant and energetic and are not willing to let life end at retirement. Secondly, gerontologists now have a better understanding of the underlying mechanism of aging itself. This is leading to an appreciation of the possibility and reality of interventions, both preventative and therapeutic.

The growing demographic weight of the elderly is forcing us to reevaluate many of our old views. Since people are living longer, should they not work longer as well? To that question I would give a qualified yes. In the US, if we do not change our attitudes, we may by around the year 2020 have some 60 million idle people in retirement not contributing to society. We cannot afford to have so many people idle. Passage of the Age Discrimination Act in 1988 was a step forward as it no longer made retirement dependent on age itself. The market place has already absorbed millions of women and minorities, so there is no reason why jobs should not be found for older people as well.

Yet there are still many challenges ahead of us. The developing world has not generally enjoyed the same increase in longevity and decreased birth rates that have been seen in industrialized countries. Sixty per cent of persons over the age of 60 currently live in the developing world and this is expected to increase to 80 per cent by around the year 2025. Thus, there will be profound social,

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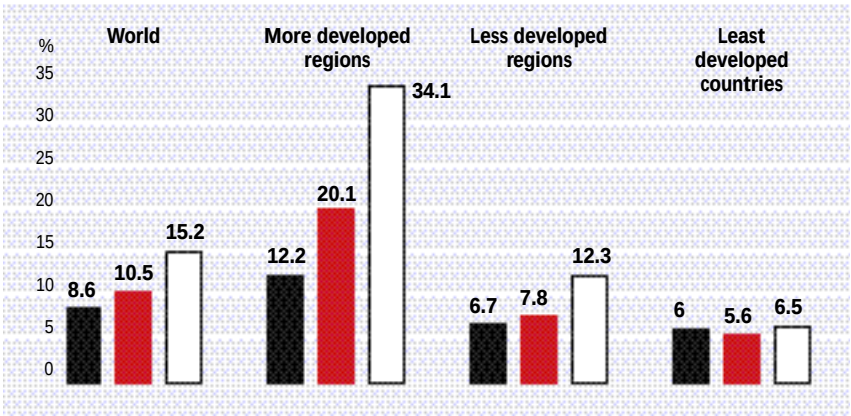
The over 65s as a percentage of the population aged 15-64 years



Source: World Population Monitoring 1996, New York, United Nations, 1988, and The Sex and Age Distribution of the World's Populations - The 1996 Revision, New York, United Nations, 1997.

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● **"Longevity and quality of life: a worldwide revolution"** was the theme of the third congress of the International Council for Global Health Progress, which was held at UNESCO's Paris Headquarters from 18 to 20 May 1998. The proceedings will be published by Plenum Publishing Corporation, New York.

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Life expectancy: two big exceptions

People are living longer in many parts of the world, but at least two world regions constitute an exception to this trend,according to a forthcoming United Nations publication, World Population Prospects—the 1998 Revision.

In sub-Saharan Africa,the Aids pandemic is raging. The worst-hit countries are mostly in the south—South Africa, Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe—except for Kenya and Rwanda.

More than 10 per cent of the population in this region is infected with HIV, the virus which leads to Aids. This means that life expectancy at birth is falling.It has already dropped from 53.4 years in the period 1985-1990 to 47.6 for 1995-2000,and is expected to fall further to 47.1 in the period 2010-2015. Without the pandemic, the figures would have been respectively 54.2, 58 and 63.4 years. So Aids will have caused a drop of 16.3 years in life expectancy over a quarter of a century.

A similar, though much smaller trend is developing in three Asian countries (Cambodia, India and Thailand), where the pandemic is expected to cut life expectancy by an average 1.6 years over the same period, and in two Latin American nations (Brazil and Haiti), where the predicted drop is 1.4 years.

In the former eastern bloc countries, life expectancy has been growing more slowly than elsewhere and is now falling. The trend began in the fading years of communism and has since gathered speed mainly for economic reasons (the massive reduction in pensions) and because of social factors (loosening family ties). Life expectancy at birth in Russia, which rose from 67.6 to 69.2 years between 1980 and 1985,fell to 66.5 in 1990 and 64.4 in 1995. It is also dropping in Ukraine (from 70.4 in 1985 to 68.8 in 1995),Belarus (71.3 to 69.6) and Bulgaria (71.6 to 71.2), though the figure is stationary in Romania (69.5 years). ■

Aging Chinese face a **welfare** gap

The state welfare system is being dismantled, but a new pension scheme is not yet ready to take over

© Christophe Kuhn, Paris

As a result of today's one-child family policy the task of supporting tomorrow's elderly will fall on a shrinking population of working people.

Liu Cunwa used to be a farmer in Sujiakou Village in north China's Shanxi Province. Now in his seventies, no longer able to work and with no children to take care of him, Liu begs or waits for hand-outs from villagers to get by.

Like millions of other elderly in the world's fastest aging developing country, Liu has fallen through the gaps as the state-run cradle-to-cremation welfare system is being dismantled and a new old-age pension regime based on Western models is slowly being built.

The government will have to work fast to fill the gaps. China is the world's fastest aging developing country. Within the next 30 years, there will be an estimated 275 million people—more than the present total population of the United States—in China over the age of 60. That will mean roughly one in five people will be in retirement or close to it. As a result of a one-child family policy aimed at stopping the country's explosive population growth, the financial burden will become heavier for the shrinking proportion of working people.

Pension reform: a high priority

Traditionally, the aged could rely on the support of their children and grandchildren. After China's 1949 communist revolution people like Liu were guaranteed food, clothing, medical care, housing and burial expenses through the collective farm.

Under the free-market reforms begun in the late 1970s, Chinese rural families are once again independent farmers. While the move to private farming has made many parts of rural China rich, it has also left the aged once again dependent on either their families or themselves.

So far the government is only beginning to introduce pension schemes in the countryside. ▶

To me, old age is always fifteen years older than I am.

Bernard Baruch (1879-1965), United States

There has been much more progress on this front in the cities, but even there progress has been slow.

Before the free-market economic reforms, state-owned enterprises provided for the elderly. Now the central government is cutting back on subsidies to those enterprises, forcing them to look at the bottom line. Recognizing that state-run enterprises won't reach profitability without shedding their social welfare responsibilities, the government is trying to find new ways of providing social safety nets. Thus, pension reform is being given a high priority. And none too soon either: elderly people have recently mounted protests in a number of large cities to press their companies to honour pension commitments.

The aim is eventually to have a national pension scheme with individuals, their employers and insurance firms providing the bulk of retirement funds. The government is to be responsible only for supplements. At the moment, though, municipal governments are handling pension reforms in the best way they see fit.

For example, in Foshan City in the southern province of Guangdong, a pension fund has been set up with employers contributing an amount equivalent to 10 per cent of workers' wages. Workers pay four per cent of their pay to the fund.

"The first step is always difficult to take," said Zhou Xiaochuan, President of the Construction Bank of China, calling for further pension reform at the earliest possible date. "Otherwise China's pension system will face serious problems in the decade between 2010 and 2020." ■

Huang Yan in Beijing

Finland's youthful oldies

Finland's baby-boomers are taking early retirement and there aren't enough youngsters to replace them

With a rapidly aging population and a huge proportion of its elderly people opting for early retirement, Finland is facing the prospect of unprecedented labour shortage. The rate of greying in Finland is faster than in other European Union countries and the number of young workers replacing the retiring elders is not proportionate.

The average age of the Finnish population is on the rise owing partly to changes in the age groups and partly to the increased life expectancy rate. Today the elderly constitute 15 per cent of the total population of around five million. This reflects the fact that Finland witnessed a higher birth rate than any other country during the West's post-World War II baby boom.

Though the statutory retirement age is 65 years, 80 per cent of the population retire before they reach 60 years of age. Carin Lindqvist-Virtanen, a senior researcher at the Ministry of Social Affairs, Helsinki, says that if the present trend to take early retirement continues "then it will cause serious problems for the labour market in the future as not many young people will be there to replace the retiring workers. The massive exodus [into retirement] could also weaken the financial position of the pension scheme."

Among Finnish men, participation in the labour market for the 55-59 group is among the lowest of the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. One main reason for this development, analysts say, has been the government's encouragement of early retirement during the economic recession of the early 1990s. This included favourable options like handsome pension and unemployment benefits allowing people to retire comfortably at the age of 55.

Age discrimination has been cited by social scientists as another factor leading employees to take early retirement. According to a report by Finland's National Committee on Aging policy, elderly people are subject to discrimination and receive degrading treatment. "The elderly are still frequently treated as economically non-productive people, a care burden or encumbrance and a medical problem," it says.

The government has also been discussing the possibility of raising the retirement age to 67 years to tackle the labour shortage problem. However, critics argue that there is little point in doing that until more people can be encouraged to work up to the statutory retirement age of 65 years.

The Finnish government last year launched a five-year programme to stop age discrimination in the workplace. Annikki Korhonen, senior Adviser at the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health, says that this National Programme for Aging Workers (NPAW) seeks to initiate a change in attitude which will help improve the position of aging workers and reduce the exodus of labour. ■

Ethirajan Anbarasan

Hard choices for the Third World

Nana Apt*

Developing countries beset with a host of other urgent problems have not yet begun to cope with the needs of aging populations

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They expected nothing. They were sitting quietly in the garden,in damp wicker chairs .... They gazed at the sea, the clouds, the hills, the closed tanneries, derelict for years, half ruined like ancient temples.... Then a boat whistled in the distance. The three old men looked at each other and nodded their heads for they knew it hadn't whistled for them. They had already left.

Yannis Ritsos (1909-), Greece

In developing countries the elderly make up a smaller proportion of the population than they do in developed regions, but their numbers are growing much faster than those of the rest of the population. In fact, as the World Health Organization's 1998 *World Health Report* points out, "Most of the increase in older populations will occur in developing countries, which will face the most serious challenges in providing a 'welfare package'of services for their older people."

Most low-income developing countries have hardly begun to face up to the aging of their populations, for reasons which are understandable. Many countries in tropical Africa, for example, are confronted with urgent problems including rapid population growth, high infant and child mortality, and excessive rural-urban migration.

Rampant urbanization

According to one study, the size of the older population in developing countries was expected to increase by almost 90 per cent between 1980 and 2000, and by over 300 per cent by 2025.[1] There are considerable regional variations in this growth. In Africa, for example, little change in the age structure of the population is expected until 2025. In East Asia, however, growth will be substantial, while China stands out as the most rapidly aging society, with a population structure that by 2025 will be closer to that of the developed regions than it is today.

Urbanization has been an essential part of most countries' development in recent decades, and in developed regions there is a disproportionate representation of older persons in urban areas and inner suburbs. In the developing countries the age structures of urban populations seem to be following this trend, but at the same time certain specific regional and national tendencies are apparent. In Africa, for example, older persons are more likely to live in rural areas than their counterparts in other world regions. In Asia, there has been a trend towards urbanization of the elderly, although a substantial majority still remain in rural areas. It is expected that by 2000 older persons in Latin America are more likely to live in urban than rural areas.

Weakened family ties

Economic and social factors are bound to have an adverse impact on the situation of older people during the process of urbanization and industrialization that is currently underway in the developing countries. That process gradually weakens traditional family patterns which provide social roles for older persons and ensure that they play a pivotal role in society even as they advance in age. The crucial question is whether cultural norms in these countries will remain strong enough for families to maintain their ties to the elderly as the dependency burden increases.

The growth in the numbers of older people in the developing world is taking place in a context where traditional obligations are changing, and the domestic arrangements of the intergenerational family which traditionally supported older persons are under threat. The indicators increasingly reveal a trend away from the traditional perceptions and practices of obligations towards respect and care for the elderly.

Support for the growing numbers of older people will largely depend on informal services provided by their kinsfolk. However, neglect and isolation of the elderly are surfacing in many African countries, for example, where only a relatively small number of people in formal employment are entitled to social security.

Low wages and job insecurity make it hard for younger Africans living in cities to support their elderly kin, just as their counterparts in rural areas are finding it hard to meet the needs of the rural elderly. In one study on the views of Ghanaian youth on aging, 81 per cent of those questioned expressed the opinion that it was no longer feasible for young families to live with their elderly relatives.[2]

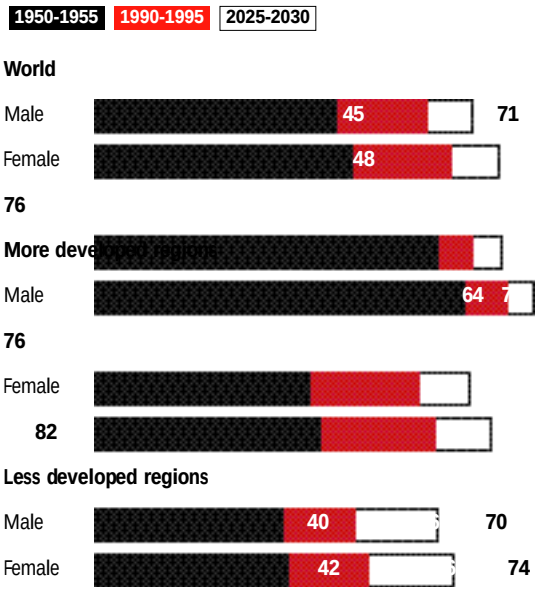
Clearly, the domestic separation of the urban elderly from the traditional structure is a reflexion of the changing nature of the traditional family in Africa. There is an evident difference of loyalties between the newer urbanized conjugal family and ►

1.El-Badry, M.A."Aging in Developing Countries: One more population problem?" In *Economic and Social Implications of Aging*, United Nations,New York,1988.
2.Apt, N.A. *Ghanaian Youth on Aging* (1991).

the extended traditional family. However,it would be a mistake to think that this development is simply the outcome of the adoption of "modern" values and attitudes;infrastructural and structural factors are involved. Urban housing conditions, for example, go a long way to explaining these changes. In rural Ghana, accommodation can easily be provided for all social categories. Shortage of land is not a factor and simple additional dwellings are constructed out of local materials as the need arises. Urban accommodation on the other hand usually has to be paid for with cash and landlords often impose a limit on the number of persons entitled to inhabit their property. These factors all bring pressure to bear on families, especially large families.

Longevity creates the possibility that household and kinship structures will contain four or five generations, whereas previously three generations was the predominant form. In other words, the working generation will be called on to take care of its parents, grandparents and great grandparents. However,policy discussions continue to be held in ▶

Life expectancy at birth



Source: World Population Prospects - The 1996 Revision, New York,United Nations, 1998.

The highest and lowest life expectancy at birth (1997)*

* The 5 countries where life expectancy at birth is highest for the 2 sexes:

Japan	**80**
Canada	**79**
France	**79**
Sweden	**79**
Switzerland	**79**

* The 5 countries where life expectancy at birth is lowest for the 2 sexes:

Sierra Leone	**38**
Malawi	**41**
Uganda	**41**
Rwanda	**42**
Zambia	**43**

Source: Yearbook of Labour Statistics, International Labour Office, Geneva, 1997

Indian elders with nowhere to go

The few old people's homes are overcrowded and traditional family solidarity is breaking down

In India, where the traditional joint family system is breaking down and there is a dearth of homes for the aged, most elderly people face an uncertain future.

India, the world's second most populous nation, has more aged people than the entire population of France. Official statistics show that there were 56 million Indians above 60 years of age in 1991, amounting to 6.5 per cent of the total population of 844 million. Only 10 per cent of them have a pension and access to some form of health scheme. The rest have no health care, insurance or assured financial support. More Indian elders will be in a similar situation as government projections indicate that the 60-plus population could double between 1991 and 2016.

Traditionally, the average Indian's life centred on the family. Joint families were the norm and the elderly stayed with their sons and relatives. Analysts say mass migration from the countryside to the cities and overseas, coupled with changing social values, have led to the disintegration of multi-generational families. As a result, many aged people are left to fend for themselves.

Even today, moving into an old people's home carries a social stigma because it suggests that one has been abandoned by one's own children. But many elders have no choice. However, Indian old people's homes are already overcrowded.

According to a directory issued by the Centre for theWelfare of the Aged (CEWA), a non-governmental organization, in 1995 India had about 500 government-funded homes for the aged, of which 17 per cent were for women. Most of these homes are run by Christian missionaries and charitable foundations. These homes are the only option for those with little or no money. Together with some 200 private homes, these institutions, both government-aided and private, can handle only 30,000 people.

"The waiting list is long and substantial numbers of elders belonging to the poor and the lower middle class will never find a place in government-funded homes," says T. Krishnan Nair, secretary of the CEWA. "In the last 10 years,private homes have appeared which only cater to upper middle class and rich elders. These homes charge exorbitant prices which elders from the middle-class and poor sectors of society can't afford."

Of the homes that exist, many fall far short of providing basic amenities like clean water and good food. The main problem,social workers say, is that there are no rules and no organization to keep tabs

Aging is the most unexpected event in a man's life.

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), Russia

Percentage of over-65s who are economically active (1996)*

* The 5 countries where the rate of the economically active population over 65 is particularly low:

Luxembourg	**1.6**
Spain	**1.8**
Finland	**1.8**
France	**2.2**
Austria	**2.9**

* the 5 countries where the rate of the economically active population over 65 is particularly high:

Bangladesh	**52.2**
Gambia (1993)	**48.5**
Sudan (1993)	**47.1**
Tonga (1994)	**43.0**
Philippines	**42.2**

Source: Yearbook of Labour Statistics, International Labour Office, Geneva, 1997

▶ terms of three-generation models. If the developing world is to depend on kinship as the key mechanism for the care of older persons and if this mechanism is to continue when family size is declining, policy concern must focus on supporting families comprising four or five and not simply three generations. Building social policies anchored in the family will clearly require strong public and community complementary measures.

Who will care for the very old?

In the developing world, the increasing numbers of the very old will have major effects on the patterns of exchange and reciprocity between generations. Great grandparents are unlikely to enjoy the financial and residential autonomy of their counterparts in the industrial world. They are also unlikely to displace the "young-old" in the performance of key household functions such as child care, food preparation and ensuring household security which have been at the heart of intergenerational exchanges within the three-generation household structure.

If low and middle income countries are to depend upon the family as the key structure in providing for the social participation and care of the "old-old", then much of the responsibility for this will fall upon the shoulders of the young-old. Although care for the old-old is still likely to be provided within the framework of kinship, it is increasingly likely to be provided outside the household. In Malaysia, Fiji and the Philippines, older people are already less likely to be living with children than the younger old.

As the demographic balance alters the political balance between youth and age, so changes in the labelling of the older person are to be expected. In the industrial world, these changes are already beginning to occur. In the developing countries, the process is likely to take longer. However, the development of a generational politics in the industrial world will influence the development of the political capacity of older persons in the developing world. Advocacy by the lobbying institutions of older persons in the industrial world should help to raise the profile of older people's interests in the developing world.

The emergence of the four- to five-generational world will necessarily result in altered social roles and identities for the old. The aging of society will also, unless existing inequalities are addressed, result in the accentuation of gender disparities in respect of wealth and quality of life. Given these considerations, steps must be taken to develop new bases of sociability and esteem for older generations. New technology can be harnessed to increase the political capacity and enhance the sociability of older persons. It can provide a technical bridge for linking older persons globally and enable the old of the developing world to gain direct assistance from their counterparts in the developed world. It also provides new opportunities for older persons to participate in shaping the research and policy agenda appropriate to an aging world. ■

Helping the elderly help themselves

HelpAge International runs a host of support projects, especially in developing countries.

HelpAge International (HAI) is one of the world's biggest networks of not-for-profit organizations involved in community activities designed with and for older people. It has 57 members worldwide, most of them in less developed countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. In countries where conflict, disaster or social transition have created particularly acute situations, HelpAge International runs programmes to support some of the most vulnerable older people, in many cases by strengthening the capacity of local organizations to address their needs. HAI is active in such fields as health care, income and food security, ophthalmic work, training and education, emergency relief, care, advocacy and research. One of its chief aims is to increase the involvement of older people in project planning and management.

In one HAI-supported village project in Cambodia, older people have started up rice banks, from which participants borrow rice for food or sowing, refunding it with interest—in rice—after the harvest. Some of the "profit" is distributed free to frail older people in the village. In South Africa HAI is working with the Muthande Society for the Aged (MUSA) on a three-year literacy project in six centres in Durban. A team of older people trained as literacy tutors are running courses in Zulu, English and numeracy, with lessons designed to help students cope with real-life challenges—pension forms, bills, telephone numbers and sewing patterns. ■

● **http://www.helpage.org**

Lebanon: there's no place like home

Charitable organizations look after the elderly when the family and the state can't cope

"Family solidarity still exists in Lebanon, and most elderly people still live with their families," says Abla Sebai, a member of the country's National Committee for Old People, which was founded a year ago. In fact,83 per cent of over-60s still live with their relatives. But, in a trend which may spread throughout the Arab world, links between generations are more and more strained and there is now a growing number of lonely and very poor elderly people.

Aunt Marie has tears in her eyes as she looks at pictures from her youth. Her only remaining relative is a niece, living abroad, and a nephew who only makes fleeting visits every fortnight.She is 75 and lives alone in the east Beirut suburb of Ashrafieh in one room furnished with a bed and two sofas. She walks with difficulty and is part of the 61 per cent of the population without health insurance. The social security authorities cut people off as soon as they retire."Less than 10 per cent of the working population receives an adequate pension," says Sebai.

Joseph Tautal, a founder-member of the Rifak al-Darb organization set up in 1994 to help the aged poor in Ashrafieh,says that "67 old people are living alone and without resources in this neighbourhood. Some of them beg in the streets of Beirut." He says people,"especially the youth, are still mostly unaware of the problem but a movement is growing among church congregations and humanitarian groups because there is no system which helps the elderly living alone."

Family lunch in a Beirut street.

© M. McEvoy/Panos Pictures, London

Seven per cent of Lebanese are over 65, the highest proportion of old people in the Arab world, where the average is reckoned to be four per cent. By 2021, the Lebanese figure is expected to reach eight per cent and 12.8 per cent four years after that. "At present, there are many young Lebanese," says Lebanese demographer Hala Naufal, "but there is a clear aging trend which is going to spread to the other Arab countries."

A long waiting list

However there is still no government policy concerning the elderly, much less for people living alone. Even preliminary studies have not been done. So everything depends on charitable organizations. And because of a serious lack of money and resources, the 37 non-governmental organizations which are doing the government's job have given priority to caring for old people who are ill.

St.George's Home, which is linked to the Greek Orthodox Church, has been taking in the elderly since 1874."Sixty of our 133 beds are unusable," says Father Demetrios Khoury, who runs the home. "The state doesn't pay its due and 68 per cent of the old people with no family left don't pay anything." Within two years, he hopes to have 220 beds available. For the time being, he is turning away new patients who cannot pay, even if they are ill. But the home still has a long waiting list.

The situation is the same at the Dar al-Ajaza al-Islami Hospital, a private clinic run by the Muslim community. "With 3,000 beds for an over-65 population of 225,000, we have a real problem," says the hospital's gerontologist. "There aren't many people in my field. There are only seven of us officially registered with the Doctor's Guild, four of us since 1995, and demand is growing all the time." In three years, only four new institutions for the elderly have been opened.

Moreover the economic crisis and the trend towards individualism which the war years created have set off developments and changes in lifestyles which have eaten away at family solidarity. "Increasingly, families say they no longer have the space, time or money to look after relatives," says Mrs Wehbé, director of the Wehbé Home for old people who are ill.

Families are getting poorer and 34 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. "Women are the people who look after old people at home," says Sebai. "But more and more of them have outside jobs. In 15 years time, the situation will be really critical." ■

Carole Donati in Beirut

Argentina's penniless pensioners

Retirees are the front-line victims of economic belt-tightening policies

© C. Cannon/Sygma, Paris

In Argentina is a country where old people are poor. Badly treated economically and socially, they are society's cast-offs, forgotten in the dark recesses of memory.

They represent 12 per cent of the total population, yet they are shabbily treated by the government, which relegates them to the sidelines of society. There are 4,500,000 over-60s,and only 2,800,000 of them receive some kind of old age pension. More than 1,500,000 people have no insurance coverage whatever and live in dire poverty.

Official economic adjustment policies have always targeted the pension system. In 1992, bowing to pressure from the World Bank, President Carlos Menem's government reduced the benefits paid to most pensioners to $150 a month. The bulk of Argentine society is unperturbed by this state of affairs and looks on the fate of its elders with indifference.

One quarter of the pensioners still receive $150 a month, an absurdly small amount which is not even enough to pay for the medicines they need. Some 50 per cent of the 1,500,000 recipients of pensions get less than $350 a month and, at the top of the scale, fewer than three per cent get more than $1,000.

The story of the Integral Medical Care Programme (PAMI) illustrates the decline in benefits available to retired people. The programme was established in 1971 and in its early years it was an efficient medical and social services agency which operated on its own funds. Its current statutes empower it to administer its own resources, which come from the contributions made by active and retired workers and compulsory employer contributions. Until the 1980s, on an annual budget not exceeding $1,700,000, PAMI covered the entire country and opened a total of 55 new health care centres. At the present time, this welfare agency has a budget of $2,400,000 for providing care for 4,000,000 registered members but it contracts the work out to service providers because it does not have the relevant infrastructure.

Cutbacks in medical services

The quality of the services provided has steadily declined over the past ten years, during which PAMI was managed by eight different administrators or presidents, who were suspected or accused of taking part in or countenancing the operation of parallel medical or health care networks. Bribery and corruption were commonplace and the credibility, efficiency and functioning of the system suffered. On more than one occasion, PAMI was virtually insolvent. Today, old people are suffering from the sudden cutback in services that are essential to their survival,such as medicines, care by family doctors and the postponement of surgical operations, owing to the failure to pay anaesthetists.

Since the early 1990s, retired people demonstrate every Wednesday in front of the parliament building. This event, which in its heyday mobilized more than 10,000 demonstrators and brought traffic to a halt in Buenos Aires, has now almost become reduced to a picturesque happening. Since the death in 1996 of the protest leader, Norma Plá, a pensioner who resorted to such unconventional tactics as chaining herself to the railings of the parliament building and organizing a popular demonstration in front of the law courts, it has lost its widespread appeal and impact. As the government rejected its every demand, the members of the movement lost heart.

But penniless though they may be, the pensioners still enjoy one enviable bonus—they constitute 20 per cent of the electorate. It is a strange paradox that there is no nationwide movement to press for the rights and interests of retired people. ■

Jorge Göttliing in Buenos Aires

Even if you've got one foot in the grave there's no reason why you should tread on others.

François Mauriac (1885-1970), France

Sage or spoilsport?

Bernadette Puijalon
and Jacqueline Trincaz*

In Africa the aged are the guardians of knowledge and power; in the West they are all too often regarded as an encumbrance

Old age is as much a historical and cultural construct as a natural phenomenon. It is based on biological, demographic, economic and political factors, but it is also built on the image of old age—in some cases positive, in others less so—that each society shapes in conformity with its values and its conception of what constitutes an ideal human being.

Some cultures have emphasized the positive side of growing old by viewing human development as a lifelong process in which the aging individual accumulates qualities and experiences. One example of this can be found in the traditional rural societies of Africa, where social differentiation is based on age, which establishes the superiority of the older over the younger generation. In these societies the elderly are few in number but they play a big role.

Those who possess the secret of the sacred myth that describes the group's origins, know the profound meaning of things and the Law of the Ancestors

In these systems where the oral tradition prevails, knowledge is the property of the very old—not so much technical knowledge, which anyone can soon absorb, as "mythical knowledge" that no young person can take away from them. Those who possess the secret of the sacred myth that describes the group's origins, know the profound meaning of things and the Law of the Ancestors, in other words the principle that governs and regulates the social order. Myth engenders ritual, the repetition of the primordial gesture, making the elderly the officiants of the domestic cult, capable of uttering sacred words, unleashing vital good or evil powers and issuing blessings and curses.

© A. Arbib/Still Pictures, Londres

A ceremony of initiation into adulthood (Kenya).

The elderly have a vitally important educational role because of their mastery of knowledge. As well as telling young generations about myth, they must transmit the history of the group and its social rules, of which they are the guardians. Transmission takes place in stages, especially during the initiation ceremonies which are milestones in the education process, enabling the elderly to keep part of the secret knowledge as long as possible and guaranteeing their cultural, religious and political hegemony. Gerontocratic power is rooted in this system. "The process is simple," says French anthropologist Louis Vincent Thomas. It consists of "confiscating basic knowledge, then serving it to the rising age groups in precisely-measured doses at well-calculated intervals through a language rich in symbols and highly emotional resonances."

Benefactions from beyond the grave

Aging is thus a process of acquisition, and the image of the elderly is highly positive. An old man is wise. He sets an example and has cheated death by drawing inspiration from the group's values. He does not fear death, which will reunite him with his ancestors and enable him to continue being useful to the community by eternally making benefactions to his descendants. Envisaging life as

*Anthropologists, University of Paris XII

an ongoing progression that continues after death leads to a conception of old age as the last stage of an ascension towards fullness of knowledge and power.

What Western societies call loss of faculties, disability and degeneration are symptoms of a metamorphosis towards a higher stage. If an old person can't keep to the point, perhaps he is talking with the ancestors. If he goes blind or deaf, he is seeing and listening to the spirits. If he shrivels up and finds it hard to get about, he has become a spirit. Accomplished, close to God and the ancestors, he lives as one of the elect. In such a society people enjoy aging and saying they are old—even very, very old. The term has many positive associations. Adding "wise" would be redundant.

The quest for eternal youth

Western societies, on the other hand, divide the human life span into successive periods in which phases of growth, maturity and climax are followed by decline and fall, leading to the inevitable, irreversible end. Faced with the unprecedented increase in life expectancy and the ever-growing number of elderly persons, these societies have two watchwords: individual resistance to aging and the solidarity of all with the poorest elderly people.

Since old age is neither desirable nor enviable, people should try and delay its onset as long as possible. They have no right to squander their capital of youthfulness; they must resist the ravages of time by leading healthy lives and taking advantage of all the remedies science has to offer—pills, health creams or surgery. The purpose of preventive action against old age is not to develop a person's capacities for living but to reject this stage of life because it is viewed as degrading.

In Western societies this time of life is dominated by negative images

This struggle is a matter of individual responsibility and the "losers"—those who fail to stay young in mind and body when they fall ill, suffer bereavement or have an accident—feel guilty. For them, life has taken a sudden, drastic turn. They have entered old age, the age of dependence. The criterion upon which this transition is based is not social or cultural but biological. It depends on an individual's physical capacities rather than on his or her chronological age. In Western societies this time of life is dominated by negative images—loneliness, incapacity and social uselessness.

Caring is the key word. When old age is synonymous with inadequacy and decline, certain things have to be done. Social workers specializing in geriatric care use special assessment methods to decide what kind of assistance should be given and what resources should be used, from geriatric medicine to long-term care facilities. This process has a logic of its own and raises the question of the cost of dependence, which strengthens the overwhelming image of the elderly as an economic burden. Never, perhaps, has a society done so much for its oldest members. They benefit from economic and social protection, but the image society has of them is deeply negative.

Segregation between age groups

Historians have shown that a society's image of individuals at a given stage of life has a significant bearing on the way they are treated. Paradoxically, Western societies, where there are more and more elderly people, organize an unprecedented form of segregation between the age groups. Young and old pursue different activities in different places at different times. The harmonious mingling of the ages in a shared setting no longer exists.

In Africa, the transformation of the traditional context by such processes as urbanization, schooling and the development of a culture based on the written word, the intermingling of populations, the spread of new religions and the arrival of new, more individualistic values are diluting if not destroying the community system and gerontocracy. Knowledge and power have changed hands. Those societies may be witnessing the "twilight of the old". However, no society remains frozen. And even when the age pyramid is turned upside down—when more people start appearing at the top than at the bottom, as in the West or in some Asian countries that have implemented proactive birth control policies—solidarity may still have a role to play—but only if a process of give-and-take between generations is restored to human relationships. ■

The worst thing about aging is that you stay young.

Jean Cocteau (1889-1963), France

Old and young in Moscow's central market.

© A. Sioux/Still Pictures, Londres

Let the good times roll

Looking for a carefree lifestyle in the US, the over-50s flock to gated communities which keep youngsters out

"Heee-haw!" rips from a row of dyed-blond women, hip-swinging to the "hot tamale" dance step and grinning wide to the twangs of country music. No, this is not a bar scene in a b-grade movie about lonesome cowboys. It's 10 o'clock in the morning in a suburb outside of the northeastern US city of Philadelphia. These gals are out for fun and fitness, making the most of their retirement at the Four Seasons at Hershey's Mill, one of the many "adult communities" mushrooming in affluent areas across the United States.

At first sight, it looks like a typical middle-class neighbourhood, with new single-story homes and postage stamp lawns at a starting price of about a quarter of a million dollars. But on a Tuesday morning when most of American suburbia resembles a no-man's land with kids in school and adults at work, this area is bustling with golfers on the 18-hole course, joggers along wooded trails and couples congregating in the local restaurant for a lecture on art history. And a look inside the homes offers other signs that this community is designed for older people. There are very few stairs to climb and the light switches are all placed low on the walls to minimize any painful stretching of an arthritic shoulder. And in case of a health emergency or a burglary, two "panic buttons" in the salon and bedroom will alert security guards. "Only in America," laughs Michael Sykes, a builder at Hershey's Mill. "We don't just sell a home but a lifestyle. We're catering to baby-boomers who feel they've worked hard and deserve a carefree life." So social activities, from Yiddish classes to bingo, are organized between tennis games and a swim at the pool, while maintenance crews look after the gardening. Guard patrols along with wooden and concrete gates enclosing the community offer a sense of security and prestige. You won't find any teenagers blasting their stereos. At Hershey's Mill, as in other adult communities across the country, federal law stipulates that 80 per cent of dwellings for the elderly must be occupied by at least one person over the age of 55. The remaining 20 per cent is open to those over 43. But residence is strictly forbidden for anyone under the age of 18.

© S. Katz/Black Star Studio B, Paris

"It's like a resort here," says Tom Carroll, a Hershey's Mill resident. "When you get to my age, 62, life's about having fun, fun, fun. No more kids to support or so many things to buy." About 80 per cent of residents are retired. "But that doesn't mean we're not busy," says Carroll, who proudly unveils the "Barbie doll house" he is building in the community wood-shop. "It's for the grandkids. Eight of the 10 of them live within 20 miles of here. Who needs 'em any closer?"

More people like Carroll are choosing to stay in adult communities close to where they raised their families instead of moving to retirement hot-spots like Florida and Arizona. Already about 10 per cent of Americans over 55 live in these communities and more are springing up, particularly in northeastern states like Pennsylvania where about 25 per cent of the population falls in this age group.

Not everyone is so charmed by the lifestyle. "We like diversity," says Bill Hoffman, who has decided not to move in after visiting the community. "It can be depressing to always be around older people." Chuck Hennessy just signed the mortgage for a new home at Hershey's Mill. "Where I live now, I have all kinds of neighbours—couples of all colours, singles, lesbians. I like that mixture", which he won't find in the overwhelmingly white new neighbourhood. "But aside from the occasional party, there wasn't enough socializing to miss." For Lucille Jorgenson, the lack of diversity is compensated by "a sense of oneness" forged by common interests. "My husband and I moved here because we felt comfortable in knowing that if one of us died, the other would be established in a community of people our age, with activities we could take part in."

The downside of such a tightly-knit community lies in the many rules to follow, covering everything from where kids can play to the obligatory white window curtains to ensure a classic look from the outside. "It's a problem when our grandkids visit," says Martha Turney. "I'm allowed to rollerblade, but my six-year-old grandson isn't." As her husband Bob explains, "A lot of people have trouble adjusting to this group mentality but they get over it. There are also those who just love to argue over the trivial rules like where you place a flower pot. But then again, you'll always find people who need to argue about something. What else do they have to do?" ■

Amy Otchet, West Chester, USA

It takes a long time to grow young.

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Spain

African youth makes a takeover

The upheavals that have rocked African societies in the past half-century have undermined the elders' traditional power base

© N. Cooper/Panos Pictures, Paris

In Africa gerontocracy is dying. The traditional political, social and economic order dominated by the elders seems doomed to extinction.

The elders exercised—and still do, though to a much lesser extent—authority in the context of a rural, clan-based society where technical, social and religious knowledge was acquired during a long process. Traditionally, the oldest family member managed the land, the main productive resource. He divided it up, distributed the revenues and decided how unconsumed products should be used. Management of agricultural surpluses gave rise to the main source of his power. He received and gave girls in marriage, since he alone was able to provide them with a dowry. The younger males were thus dependent on him when they took a wife. Marriage was a decisive step towards social promotion and claiming a birthright. An elder could use his wealth to increase the number of his wives and strengthen his social ties.

The elder's power also had a political and religious basis. He presided over the village's destiny by taking part in the council of elders and administering the ancestor cult. As a member of secret organizations he helped enforce respect for the social order and sanctioned anyone who broke the rules. The elder was the master, even though he consulted the younger members of the community, especially on family matters. He was treated with deep respect. Young people and women adopted a submissive attitude towards him.

When individualism erodes clan structures

Most African societies are patrilineal, and women and children live with the husband's family. Women had an inferior social status. They acquired influence with the onset of menopause, which brought their condition closer to that of the men, but never obtained the right to represent or head the family. Even after reaching an advanced age, they were barred from taking part in official decision-making and enjoyed no economic or social power. At best, they wielded their authority in the private arena, especially over their daughters-in-law.

In the recent past a series of events and developments have enabled youth to supplant their elders. Colonization, the arrival of Christianity and Islam and the implementation and subsequent spread of the market economy and the wage-earning system have placed more ►

emphasis on the individual than the clan and taken a toll on traditional structures. But the decisive factors in the emancipation of young people have been education and urbanization.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the small minority admitted to Western universities played a key role in transforming African societies and ousting their elders from positions of power. Western education discredited the wisdom of the elders. Now, "those who know" are those who have gone to school and are, therefore, young. Their studies, which they pursue in town, enable them to escape from the elders' control.

During the colonial period, primary schools, missions and colleges of education helped train a group of young, skilled, "educated" Africans including teachers, civil servants and health workers. Some turned away from their fellow Africans and African values, while others grew aware of colonial oppression and became close to the working class forming in the cities. They were in the vanguard of political and labour struggles as well as the battle for independence. Most of the earliest African heads of state were young. But by clinging to power until an advanced age, some have lent credence to the idea that the African gerontocracy has not had its last word.

The spread of Western values

The overall development of African society nevertheless continues to undermine the gerontocracy's foundations. Urbanization has dealt a blow to an essentially rural-based political organization. In the 1940s, economic activities began shifting towards the cities. Young people are the most mobile group, capable of adapting to city life, to new technology and to modern forms of work. They are also more receptive to the spread of Western values, conveyed by the school system, the administration and the media. Granted, young city-dwellers are still attached to the villages where they were born. But by living far from their communities, they are gradually adopting new lifestyles and becoming self-sufficient. A more individualistic society is taking shape in which the relationships of domination and allegiance between young people and the old generations are dying out. Any young man who can afford to can now get married. Even in the countryside, which is intensifying its exchanges with the cities, these developments are having an effect.

But on two counts change is coming slower. First, gender inequality persists and women, including in the cities, are still subject to the goodwill of the men in their families. Second, most young Africans remain dependent on the group because of low urbanization and school attendance rates, unemployment and poverty. The question of whether they will be able to take over the reins from their parents is posed today in dramatic terms. ■

Codou Bop in Dakar

Sometimes her face
will suddenly appear
with terrifying
inappropriateness
before her in a mirror.
She knows that if she's
patient, its gaze will
break, demurely,
decorously,
like a well-taught
child's,
it will turn from her as
though it were
embarrassed by the
secrets
of this awful hide-and
seek.
If she forgets, though,
and glances back
again, it will still be in
there,
furtively watching,
crying.

C.K. Williams (1936-), United States

'When are we leaving?'

A husband's moving chronicle of his wife's descent into Alzheimer's disease

JB is an elderly retired professional man who lives quietly in an English provincial city. Early in 1997 his 77-year-old wife was diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease, an age-related degenerative brain disorder which affects memory, thinking, behaviour and emotion.

The first sign that something was seriously amiss had come two years before, when IM had gone to London to visit friends. She had failed to arrive and returned home, having completely forgotten where she was going. Before that, during a question-and-answer session at an academic gathering, she had been uncharacteristically lost for words. The couple saw their doctor who asked IM who the Prime Minister was. She said she had no idea but that surely it didn't matter. There followed a series of brain scans and exhaustive memory and language tests, as a result of which she was diagnosed as being in the early stages of Alzheimer's.

Inexorable mental decline

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, a malady that afflicts one in 20 people over the age of 65. It affects all groups in society irrespective of social class, gender, ethnic group or geographical location. According to current estimates, by the year 2000 there will be roughly 18 million people with dementia in the world, about two-thirds of them Alzheimer victims.

Treatment is in its infancy and as yet nothing seems to slow the sufferer's inexorable mental decline. The disorder's first stage may seem relatively benign. After all, most people as they age lose mental sharpness, misplace things, forget people's names and suffer other minor mental lapses. From then on, however, it's downhill all the way. "Alzheimer's is like an insidious fog," JB says, "barely noticeable until everything around has disappeared. After that it is no longer possible to believe that a world outside the fog exists."

As the disease progresses, the patient becomes dependent on others for help with all aspects of daily life. This care is usually provided by the immediate family and the period of dependency can last for many years. "Alzheimer sufferers are not always gentle," JB notes, and caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease has been described as calling for

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"She now has a great fear of trees."

the patience of Job, the wisdom of Solomon and the selflessness of a saint.

A few months ago JB published a beautifully written short memoir of his wife, describing their lives together "Then" (before the onset of Alzheimer's) and "Now", a series of vignettes of IM's tragic descent into mental nullity. Serialized in the press, it struck a powerful chord among many who are not only facing a more prolonged old age than that of their forebears but may be coping with the decline of someone to whom they are close. IM's case is particularly heart-rending in view of what she had done before she began, as she put it, to sail into the darkness. She is Iris Murdoch, one of the century's most gifted novelists writing in English and an author with a devoted readership worldwide (her works have been translated into 23 languages). Her husband, JB, is John Bayley, a noted literary critic and former Oxford professor.[1]

'I'm grateful that there isn't what you might call clear-eyed despair going on. There is a kind of animal trust in the person she is with.'

For over forty years Iris Murdoch had been engrossed in writing fiction and philosophy. In 27 novels published between 1954 and 1995, she had created a vivid world peopled by intelligent and intensely human figures whose exceptional capacities for feeling and thinking were tested in situations that were often macabre, comic and melodramatic. She also wrote about philosophy, including a critical study of Sartre (1953) and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992). She had created and carried the novels entirely in her head, planning them for months before effortlessly writing them down. Now she no longer knows their titles.

A voyage into darkness

Bayley's memoir plunges the reader into the world of sufferer and carer. Today Iris Murdoch can no longer talk coherently or remember where she is or has been. The day begins and ends with the tussles of dressing ("most days a happy and comic business") and undressing. Around ten in the morning it's time for the Teletubbies, an animated cartoon show on children's television, which Iris watches "with something approaching glee." She is equally absorbed in sports programmes, although she does not know the play or the scores. When she twitters away incomprehensibly Bayley finds himself sustaining the illusion of a conversation by uttering meaningless sentences of his own. When they go out of doors she absently picks up stones and twigs and brings them home. Her only coherent phrase, which she repeats again and again, is: "When are we leaving?" She has a prodigious appetite for sleep. It's some kind of consolation that she does not seem aware of what she's lost. "I'm grateful that there isn't what you might call clear-eyed despair going on. There is a kind of animal trust in the person she is with." Bayley is quite devoid of self-pity; his love for Murdoch shines from every sentence. He gets through the days by keeping busy. Jokes are important, the sillier the better to try to get a smile which "transforms her face, bringing it back to what it was, and with an added glow that can seem almost supernatural.". He tries to take the short view of things, never looking beyond the next meal. Once he loses control and explodes into anger as Iris goes on meaninglessly watering the house plants.

"Like being chained to a corpse, isn't it?" says the wife of a fellow sufferer. He disagrees, refusing to feel that Iris Murdoch's individuality is absorbed into "the common symptoms of a clinical condition". He accepts that eventually he will need outside help, but "Like someone who knows he cannot for much longer avoid going out into the cold I still shrink from the need for professional care . . . even the efforts of kind friends. All that is to come, but let us postpone it while we can."

Meanwhile the disease has oddly intensified their togetherness. For years they had each been engrossed in their own work, in a kind of conjugal solitude. "Now we are together for the first time. . . . Every day we are physically closer; and Iris's little 'mouse cry', as I think of it, signifying loneliness in the next room, the wish to be back beside me, seems less and less forlorn, more simple, more natural. She is not sailing into the dark: the voyage is over, and under the dark escort of Alzheimer's she has arrived somewhere. So have I." ■

Roy Malkin

1. *Iris, A Memoir of Iris Murdoch*, by John Bayley, Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., London, 1998. To be published also in French, Dutch, German and Swedish.

Old age's

© Bernard Descamps/Agence Vu, Paris

Today's elderly people are increasingly reluctant to be sidelined into inactivity when they retire from full-time work. To satisfy their appetite for enjoyment and achievement, retirees are getting involved in a host of activities, from universities for older people to senior citizens' Internet clubs. Many of them are making a notable contribution to society using their knowledge and experience to help bridge the generation gap.

French seniors bridge the divide

"When I was working, I liked having apprentices and passing my skills on to young people," says Henri Guerinot, a French cabinet-maker who regards his retirement as just another kind of activity. At 83, he is as enthusiastic as ever and still teaching his craft to youngsters between the ages of nine and 14.

His passion has proved infectious. More than a decade ago, in the French city of Troyes, he was the first retired person to get involved in an association called "L'Outil en main" ("Let's Pick Up Our Worktools"), which was set up to encourage contact between young people and retired craftworkers. Through it, the elderly can stay active and continue to feel useful.

Today more than 100 elderly people are following Guerinot's example and teaching children outside school hours such skills as carpentry, glass-making, stone-cutting, construction and plumbing. The experience, patience and wisdom of the old workers go well with the inquisitiveness, talent and awkwardness of the young people, all making for the kind of tender complicity familiar to grandparents and grandchildren.

Strengthening ties between generations is also the goal of another French movement, "Flamboyance", whose members are retired people who each year stage a series of cultural and sporting events (known as "Le printemps des générations", or "The Dawn of New Generations") all over the country. The proceeds go towards helping the least fortunate young people to get a start in life.

The amounts raised—between 5,000 francs ($1,000) and 50,000 francs ($10,000) from each event—are modest but they can work wonders. Examples include a 17-year-old girl who was able to complete her training as a personal care-provider, which she had had to break off due to lack of money, another girl who got a computer so she could do secretarial work at home and a young man who had his driving school fees paid for so he could become a messenger.

Last year some 15 jobs were created in this way for needy young people. Not a large number, but an

- **L'Outil en main:**
  23 rue Pierre-Gauthier,
  10000 Troyes.
  Tel:(33-3) 25 73 35 88.
- **Mouvement de la Flamboyance:**
  4 Bd du Temple, 75011 Paris.
  Tel:(33-1) 42 52 20 21

new horizons

Eternal students

At the age of 60 or thereabouts, many people come to the end of their working lives, but this does not mean that they no longer have any urge to learn. According to figures from the Paris-based International Association of Universities of the Third Age (AIUTA), there are more than 1,700 senior citizens' universities worldwide catering for these eternal students.

Although their structures and management methods differ widely from one country to another, universities for the elderly usually share a desire to help older people play a full part in cultural and social life. They do not award degrees, and they do not require their students to have any particular qualification when they enroll.

One successful example of this type of institution was set up at Shimizu, in Japan, in 1985. During the last academic year, it had 2,500 students. At this "university for voluntary students", which has been awarded a prize by the Japanese government for "the valuable contribution it has made as an adult education establishment", there is no age-limit for either students or teachers. The teachers are volunteers, as well as the students, enrolment fees are reasonable and there is ample opportunity to make new friends.

Shimizu has one male student for every four females and the most common age bracket ranges between 60 and 70, although there is an increasing number of older students attending classes in dancing, drama, the humanities or manual work.

The aim is to give old people the opportunity to study by providing them with knowledge enabling them to lead better, healthier, richer and happier lives. In the opinion of Dr Tak Kwan-Kong, a specialist in geriatrics and editor-in-chief of *The Journal of the Hong Kong Geriatrics Society*, "This type of institution is something to be encouraged, especially nowadays when elderly people have often been given a negative image. Exercising the mind can maintain mental fitness, just as physical exercise can maintain physical fitness. An appropriate life-style, rather than drugs,

When I happen
to stop and look
in the depths
of my bright mirror,
alas, an unknown
old man
seems to meet my eye.

Kakinomoto No Hitomaro
(681?-729), Japan

It's never too late to surf

In September 1998, Dr. Jason Grinnell was the winner of a contest organized by the SeniorsSearch company to find the world's oldest Internet surfer. At 96 years of age, Jason moves about the Net like a fish in water. "I have seen the birth of the automobile, airplane, telephone, radio and television. Now the computer and the Internet have opened a whole new world for my wife Theresa and myself that, God willing, we will continue to explore for many years to come", says Dr. Grinnell, whose interest in computers began when he was 89.

A retired Texas doctor, Jason Grinnell is by no means the only elderly person to use the computer for sending or receiving e-mail, shopping online or merely looking through pages on which there is no shortage of cookery recipes or advertisements for dream cruises. SeniorsSearch's aims are clear from its slogan: "the only search directory exclusively for the over-50 age group". Anybody over 50 can become a member free of charge and explore the sections on offer, which include antiques and collections, art galleries and museums, books or social clubs.

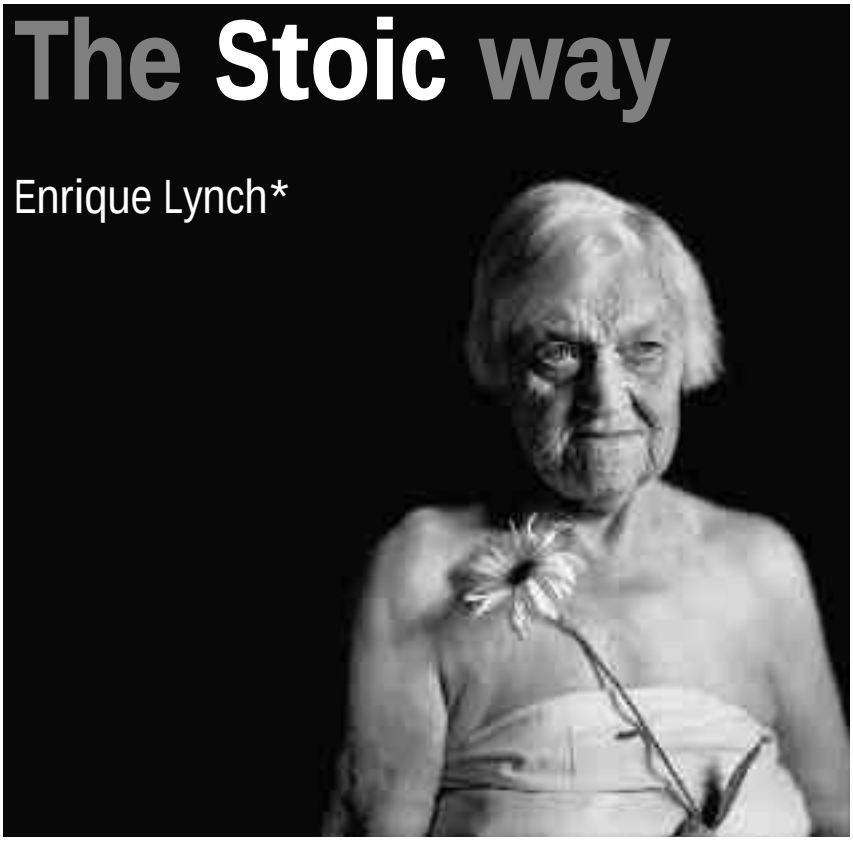
SeniorNet, a non profit-making organization set up in California twelve years ago with the aim of teaching older people to use modern technologies, has another of the best-known homepages most widely consulted by this category of the public. With its 27,000 members, SeniorNet receives 500,000 visits a month, most of them from surfer veterans in the United States and Canada with an average age of 68. Its annual budget stands at $1.5 million, one-third of which comes from members' subscriptions and the remaining two-thirds from advertisers and donations from foundations and companies, which have no hesitation in funding this type of venture, since "in exchange, they get good publicity and tax breaks," explains Ann Wrixon, the organization's executive director.

Other sites choose to foster relations between generations. This is the case of the French *Cyberpapy* site on which older people help youngsters with their homework—something they have done all their lives but can now do by computer. Created and funded by the Boulanger corporate foundation, it consists of a large electronic mailbox divided into seven theme areas—literature, history and geography, languages, philosophy, composition, mathematics and the physical sciences—to which pupils send in their questions. In practice, the older people, who do not give their names or occupations, reply within 24 hours. The questions and answers are constantly monitored by a team of professionals. ■

- http://www.seniorssearch.com
- http://www.seniornet.org
- http://www.cyberpapy.com

The Stoic way

Enrique Lynch*



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In a world devoted to the cult of youth and the machine, classical Greek philosophy can help us to grow old gracefully

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How much goodness and humour do you need to bear the horror of old age? The garden outside and the flowers in the bedroom are beautiful, but the spring is, as we say in Vienna, "a farce". I have finally discovered what it means to feel cold.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Austria

The Greek philosopher Plato believed that philosophers are wise men who devote their lives to learning how to die and that philosophy, among other things, is a long and difficult learning process which teaches us to grow old and face up to the climactic moment of our lives. There is nothing melancholy about this process of "learning to die". On the contrary, it means that it is only towards the end of our days that we are really able to profit from life and confront the imminence of death with fortitude and determination and without despondency. In the minds of the ancients, living to a ripe old age offered not so much respect from society as a reassurance that they would pass on gently from the world of the living to the kingdom of the dead.

The culture of Antiquity suggested that two forms of existence were worthy of emulation: that of heroes like Achilles who enjoy a short and action-packed life, and that of venerable elders who learn to lead quiet and secret inner lives in accordance with the ideal of Stoicism. In a way, it was impossible to envisage these patterns of individual behaviour in isolation from each other, and the models for living they offered were highlighted when the two were contrasted. As a result, our cultural tradition has for centuries made an almost religious cult of the two archetypes personified by the hero and the elder. According to the former, the hero's bravery is a quality which makes it possible to confront the risks and vicissitudes of life and which steels the character. The second conjures up an image of the experience and peace of mind which, so the Roman philosopher Seneca believed, only comes with old age, in other words when the desires of the flesh forsake us and the mind becomes detached from sensuality and soars in flight. To cut a long story short, the ancients felt that it was best to die either very young or very old, since old age, in spite of its disadvantages, was the age of reason in which the mind finally triumphs.

However, we no longer live in the age of ancient Greece or the Renaissance or even of old-fashioned bourgeois society, which also fluctuated between the ideal of the hero and the culture of the patriarch. Ours is a society which has left traditional values behind and is dangerously inclined to offer an exclusively technological solution to all life's problems. It's not so much that we disregard the value of the experience or tradition which used to form a natural part of the knowledge of very old people as that we have learned that no wise person, however retentive or sharp their memory may be, can remember as much as a computer, as the champion chess-player Gary Kasparov discovered (although he, incidentally, is still regarded as being a young man).

Enduring suffering and solitude

Our collective ideal is machine-like, and we know that when machines grow old they are taken out of commission and dismantled and their parts recycled, or else they are sent to the scrapyard to be broken up. We do the same with our old people so that, although technology has succeeded in extending the limits of our useful lives as never before and in balancing our diet, and is gradually unravelling all the secrets of our bodies, it does not seem to have found a satisfactory answer to living in old age. The religion of modernity only worships youthful gods. Our world has come to be populated by splendid young people who are superficial and pampered and whose impulsive behaviour knows no bounds, and by growing numbers of old people who, as the French thinker Jean Baudrillard has observed, inhabit a kind of Third World of existence. People with no future and painful memories of a past in which nobody is interested, the denizens of this Third World are condemned to live in a mundane present dedicated to generating profits for the powerful cosmetics and mass tourism industries and for the pension and insurance system that manages workers' savings. No matter how much technology may have improved their lot, the status of old people bears no resemblance to the remedy for all ills preached by the ancient Stoics. The onset of old age not only brings the threat of sufferings that were not known in the past, such as Alzheimer's disease, but is also compounded by such misfortunes as solitude, to which there is no easy answer. Only by adopting a new Stoicism, a rule for living which teaches us how to grow old and die, as it did in the past, shall we be able to prevent the greater life expectancy due to technical progress from bringing new and painful experiences in its wake. ■

Debt relief: a creditable solution?

Angela Travis*

The suffering caused by Hurricane Mitch and the financial tempests rattling the global economy bring new reasons to lighten the debt of the poorest countries

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A demonstration in favour of debt relief for poor countries held in Birmingham (UK) in May 1998.

The devastation wrought by Hurricane Mitch in November was horrific. In three days, the hurricane wiped out 20 years of development in the region, according to UN agencies, leaving thousands of people dead and reportedly about three million homeless.

But as governments and international organizations tried to mobilize funds for relief efforts, another debate reared its head: should Nicaragua and Honduras, both low income, heavily indebted countries badly hit by Hurricane Mitch, continue to pay a total of $2 million a day in debt repayments—money which could provide temporary housing for 800,000 people?

The British Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short, stated early on that debt relief was "an irrelevance" when the priority lay in avoiding cholera and "pulling people out of the mud". But a few days later Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown called on all creditors to support a two-year moratorium on debt service payments.

This shift in thinking reflects a growing realization as to just how bad things have gotten for the world's poorest nations. Since at least the mid-1990s, a few developing countries have simply stopped servicing a large portion of their debts—that is paying the interest and principal on loans. The reason is simple: their governments are effectively bankrupt. Mozambique and Nicaragua are only able to pay a third of their scheduled debt service (the amount of repayments on all loans). For Nicaragua, this fraction amounts to $221 million a year—three times that which the government spends on health.

Bankrupt states

By 1996, it was clear even to the world's major creditors that something had to be done. When middle or high income countries like Brazil, Jordan or Russia have run into problems managing their debts, the standard approach has been to reschedule or push back their service payments through agreements generally brokered by multilateral organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or, in the case of commercial lending, by the Paris Club, an informal group of creditor governments with a permanent secretariat in the French Treasury.

But loan rescheduling cannot solve the problems of the poorest countries. Their financial crises have been so extreme that they generally manage to service just half of their total debts.

The World Bank proposed the HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Countries) Initiative in 1996 (see box). The aim was to enable poor countries to get a more secure financial footing. This was "good news for the poor," according to the bank president, James Wolfensohn. "This initiative is a breakthrough . . . It deals with debt in a comprehensive way to give countries the possibility of exiting from unsustainable debt."

Under the HIPC Initiative, creditors agree to share the burden of cutting debts including for, the first time, those stemming from World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans. The World Bank determines the "sustainable"level at which a country can ►

*Media Officer for the Jubilee 2000 Coalition

© J. Van Hasselt/Sygma, Paris

The aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in a Nicaraguan village.

manage a debt and the creditors cut their portions respectively. A list of 41 countries has been drawn up, identifying when and how much debt relief should be expected. It is estimated that another 25 countries will eventually be added to the list.

However, the plan looks better on paper than in practice. In short, the HIPC initiative delivers too little, too late, according to critics and non-governmental organizations campaigning for Third World debt relief. Only two countries, Uganda and Bolivia, have had their debts lightened, while another five are slated for assistance in 1999. Others like Tanzania and Ethiopia cannot expect anything until 2002.

In understanding the HIPC shortcomings, it is important to remember that many of the poorest countries have long been paying less than half the scheduled debt service.It's a bit like having two loans, but only being able to pay interest on the second one. If the bank writes off the first loan, your bank balance will look better, but your payments on the second loan continue, so you do not gain any additional benefits.

Consider the case of Uganda, the first country to benefit from HIPC.Under the initiative, its total debt has been reduced by just 11 per cent. The story is the same for Mozambique, due to receive relief in June 1999. Although the country's total debt (about $5.8 billion in 1996) will drop by $1.4 billion, much of this is "unrecoverable" debt—meaning debt the government wasn't expected to repay regardless of HIPC.

Mozambique's debt service will only fall from $112 million a year to $100 million, a saving equivalent to about 80 cents per capita.

While reducing total debt is important to keep a country's books looking healthy, the key to finding new resources to invest in education or health services, for example, lies in cutting those debts that countries actually service and not those considered unrecoverable.

For Jean-Louis Sarbib, World Bank vice p0resident for Africa, HIPC is "not really about wiping off debt . . . It's just making sure that these countries can remain good credit risks. . . . The idea of HIPC is in fact to allow you to continue to be a good financial citizen of the world community."

But why not simply write off the debts and service payments to offer a fresh start to poor countries? G. Gondwe, Deputy Director of the IMF's African Department outlined some key concerns in the *Financial Times* in August 1998: "Who would lend again to recipients of such cancellation? What guarantee is there that the money saved would be put to effective use?"

Gondwe is referring to the familiar argument of moral hazard: writing off debts and service payments will reduce the incentive to better manage finances in the future and may worsen already poor credit ratings. This argument is valid when loans have been made for sound economic investments. But what about money loaned not primarily for investment reasons, but rather for political reasons to win allies or to increase foreign exports?

There is no scarcity of cases of politically motivated lending. Presidents Marcos of the Philippines, Suharto of Indonesia and Mobutu Sese Seko of the former Zaire were all grateful recipients of loans from the West. Nicaragua and Mozambique were equally well supported by the former Soviet Union. Very little attention was paid to how the money was used or abused.

"One-fifth of all developing country debt consists of loans given to prop up compliant dictators," insists Joseph Hanlon,policy officer with the Jubilee 2000 Coalition, which regroups NGOs, grassroots movements and trade unions in 40 countries to push for Third World debt relief. "But when the dictators fall, it is expected that their democratically elected successors should repay those debts. Lenders must take a much greater share of the responsibility and accept the losses."

Popular pressure for debt cancellation

There is another key question: who will benefit from debt relief? There is a genuine concern that blanket debt relief will not be used to reduce poverty and improve education or sanitation systems. Democracy is still young in many developing countries. Many don't have official watchdogs or independent media strong enough to examine government policy.

For the World Bank, the solution lies in linking debt relief to strict adherence to IMF structural adjustment policies. Tanzania and Ethiopia, for example, have suffered from delays in relief because they did not make the adjustments deemed necessary. But does such macro-economic adjustment ensure that the poor will benefit?

Oxfam argues that additional "human" measures must be put in place. The British NGO proposes that for every dollar saved through debt relief, the government spends an equivalent amount on health, education and sanitation. Although criticized for encroaching on the decision-making power of governments, this approach has the advantage of reassuring creditors that debt relief will not be wasted.

For the time being, this kind of human

Only two countries, Uganda and Bolivia, have had their debt burden lightened, while another five are slated for assistance in 1999. Others like Tanzania and Ethiopia cannot expect anything until 2002.

development perspective is essentially ignored by creditors. However, the World Bank has agreed to review the HIPC Initiative this year. Instead of waiting for any major changes, the governments of Norway, Finland and Japan have decided to begin canceling debts independently.

Two factors help explain this momentum. First, popular pressure is growing. In May 1998, for example, 70,000 people formed a human chain around the leaders attending the G8 summit in Birmingham (UK). Secondly, the prospect of global economic recession is forcing creditors to change their way of thinking. The financial crashes in East Asia and Russia sent shock waves around the international financial community. The frantic bailouts of South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia and Russia have pressed the IMF to come to the rescue with over $140 billion in finance.

The current climate of recession has highlighted the reasons for raising the calls for poor country debt relief. It is difficult to believe claims made by creditors that they cannot afford further debt relief. The HIPC Initiative for the poorest would cost just $8 billion—a pittance compared to the billions allocated to push back the debt payments of middle income countries. Japan, for example, which is far deeper in recession than European or North American countries, has managed to cancel $500 million worth of debts owed by developing countries.

Canceling effectively unpayable debts owed by the poorest countries may turn out to be a sensible policy for all creditors. As well as the strong moral argument for debt relief, there could be sound financial

A **multi-speed road** to rescue

Even before Hurricane Mitch, Nicaragua and Honduras applied for debt relief through the HIPC Initiative. A decision for Nicaragua is expected within months, says Jeff Katz, principal economist for the initiative, while "Honduras' qualifying track record was a little more ambiguous, so we will have to see."

Katz points out that the "special needs" of countries facing post-conflict situations are already recognized. "Post-disaster situations present many of the same issues. One could argue—even more than in a post-conflict situation—that the country concerned is not responsible for a disaster occurring," he says.

It can take up to six years for a country to receive debt relief under the HIPC Initiative. The relief should come only after a country works out a structural adjustment programme with the World Bank and IMF and then demonstrates that it can adhere to those policies. At the end of this period, the country could see its loans reduced if principal and interest payments exceed limits considered unsustainable. For example, debt service charges are considered unmanageable if they amount to more than 20 per cent of the value of a country's annual exports.

However, HIPC relief can be quicker for countries that demonstrate both need and good behaviour. For example, as of November 1998, Uganda and Bolivia were receiving debt relief because of their relatively strong track records in adhering to structural adjustment policies. Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guyana, Mali and Mozambique are now slated for assistance. The total amount of debt reductions already agreed is worth about six billion dollars in terms of the nominal value of principal and interest payments originally due.

Of course, a lot of these debts were not going to be paid anyway. But the beauty of HIPC, says Katz, is that it cleans up the accounting books of these countries so that they can continue to receive international assistance instead of being forced to rely on high interest commercial loans. "Debt relief is just part of the financial picture in reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development," he says. "A larger part for most countries will be new grants and new flows of varying concessional resources."

Critics maintain that relatively little has been done to help poor countries manage their debts in comparison to the billions of dollars mobilized by the international community to rescue middle and high income countries, such as during the Asian crisis. "These are very different kinds of money," says Katz. "At the World Bank, we have the capital base which enables us to relatively easily and quickly borrow money to re-lend to South Korea. But in the case of a poor country, the money that we make available to them is not on commercial terms. It is very highly concessional [minimal service charges]. That money is essentially tax-payers' money, which means that it is very hard to mobilize." ■

● **http://www.worldbank.org/hipc**

Outlawing **excision**

Several African countries have banned the ancient ritual of excision. The latest is Côte d'Ivoire, where a bill is expected to go before parliament early this year.

Women's campaigners have welcomed the move. Such mutilations often involve cutting the clitoris, and sometimes the labia, with dirty razor blades or broken glass and frequently lead to death. There are no figures because such deaths are usually hidden, or blamed on something else.

If the law gets passed, anyone who excises a female may be jailed up to five years and fined $4,000. However, the legislation will be difficult to apply. Non-excised women are considered incomplete, and more likely to have lovers before marriage, a deterrent for prospective husbands. "It's part of the culture, and parents are ashamed when their little girls are not excised," says Geneviève Bro-Grebe, president of the Ivoirian Network of Women's Organizations. "And it makes a lot of money for those who practice excision. It's a big feast, a big event for society as a whole."

As Gueï Bah Koné, a woman who used to excise girls but decided to stop after working with women's groups, explains, "during the excision period in December, I could excise up to 20 girls a day. In return, their parents gave me sheep, cows, and money. Now I earn nothing."

Another stumbling block is illiteracy: 68 per cent of Côte d'Ivoire's women can't read newspapers informing them of their new rights. So the task of spreading the message has been left to NGOs, like the Ivoirian Association for the Defence of Women (AIDF). Constance Yai, the AIDF president, has been traveling the country explaining the dangers of excision and the related HIV risks. She says many people mistakenly think excision is required under Islamic law.

Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Guinea, and Ghana have all adopted laws banning excision, but it is still widely carried out. As in Côte D'Ivoire, half the women in Guinea are excised. In Ghana, where about 20 per cent of women are excised, several women were recently tried and sentenced for continuing their mutilation trade. ■

Museums hoist their new colours

René Rivard*

The last two decades have seen an explosion in the number of museums and a transformation of their place in society

Museums reached a turning-point at the end of the 1960s. They tried to smarten themselves up, to revive their job of teaching the public and to attract more visitors. Many new ones opened—more than half the world's 25,000 museums started up during the past 50 years. Even the idea of what a museum should be has changed considerably and given rise to a broad range of variations.

Museums were invented at the end of the 19th century as places to gather together and preserve the finest examples of human ingenuity and present them to the public. Early museums often lacked the resources to look after their collections properly and exhibit them attractively. They became dull, grey places which were cramped and increasingly dusty.

These days greyness is rare. In fact, I would divide museums into seven main categories and associate each one with a colour: orange for "interpretative" museums, green for those with an ecological approach, yellow for community-centred museums, blue for those which aim to share knowledge, gold for museums which go in for the spectacular, silver for business-oriented museums and mauve for museums of remembrance.

Interpretation—a watershed in museum history

The interpretative movement began in the 1950s in US national parks such as the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone and the Florida Everglades and spread throughout the English-speaking world, from Canada to Australia via the United Kingdom, reaching as far as English-speaking countries in Africa.

Interpretation marks a watershed in the history of museums. It gives priority to a subject or theme rather than the exhibits themselves, which are considered as evidence from the past and not as the centre of attention. Interpretation means stimulating and surprising people, and challenging accepted ideas, without turning the museum into a classroom. Visitors are encouraged to refer to their own experiences, not just straight scientific knowledge, and to relate on equal terms to the heritage they are learning about.

In addition to national parks, hundreds of historic spots around the world have chosen this interpretative approach. Among them are Canada's Louisbourg Fortress and, in the United States, the town of Salem and the battlefields of the War of Independence. Since the late 1970s, this trend has involved new ways of presenting things based on the experience of the visit itself. Visitors explore the ambience of a place steeped in history and see what they can learn from it and what ideas it gives them. Interpretation confronts people with questions, theories and new perceptions of history. The settlement of the West in the United States, the slave trade and colonialism, for example, are put in perspective. Armed with this kind of critical approach, visitors come up with their own interpretations of the things they are presented with.

In Quebec, museums which take an interpretative approach have experimented a lot with the role of interpreter and critic and offer their visitors quite original places and experiences. The Châteauguay Battle Centre (commemorating Canada's defeat of an American invasion in 1812) has chosen to question the part played by heroes in our societies. The museum at Trois-Pistoles encourages discussion about the intensive whaling carried out by the Basques in the estuary of the St. Lawrence river in the 16th century.

A green revolution

In the 1970s, the popularization of museums was taken further with the development of the ecomuseum concept by Georges Henri Rivière, an imaginative French museologist who took a new look at the three basic components of a museum—the building, the collections housed in it and the people who come to see them. He favoured replacing buildings as the site of museums with a wider setting in which typologically classified collections would

* Consultant for museums and heritage development

A pioneering UNESCO periodical

When the UNESCO periodical Museum was launched in 1948, it was the first international magazine devoted to museums. Today, under the title Museum International, it is still the only one. Published quarterly in 5 languages, it provides information and analysis about museology and has followed step by step the developments that have transformed the museum world. In the last half century it has done much to further recognition of the importance of the cultural heritage by the international community. In recent decades, UNESCO has contributed to the design, construction or modification of museums in over 50 countries. ■

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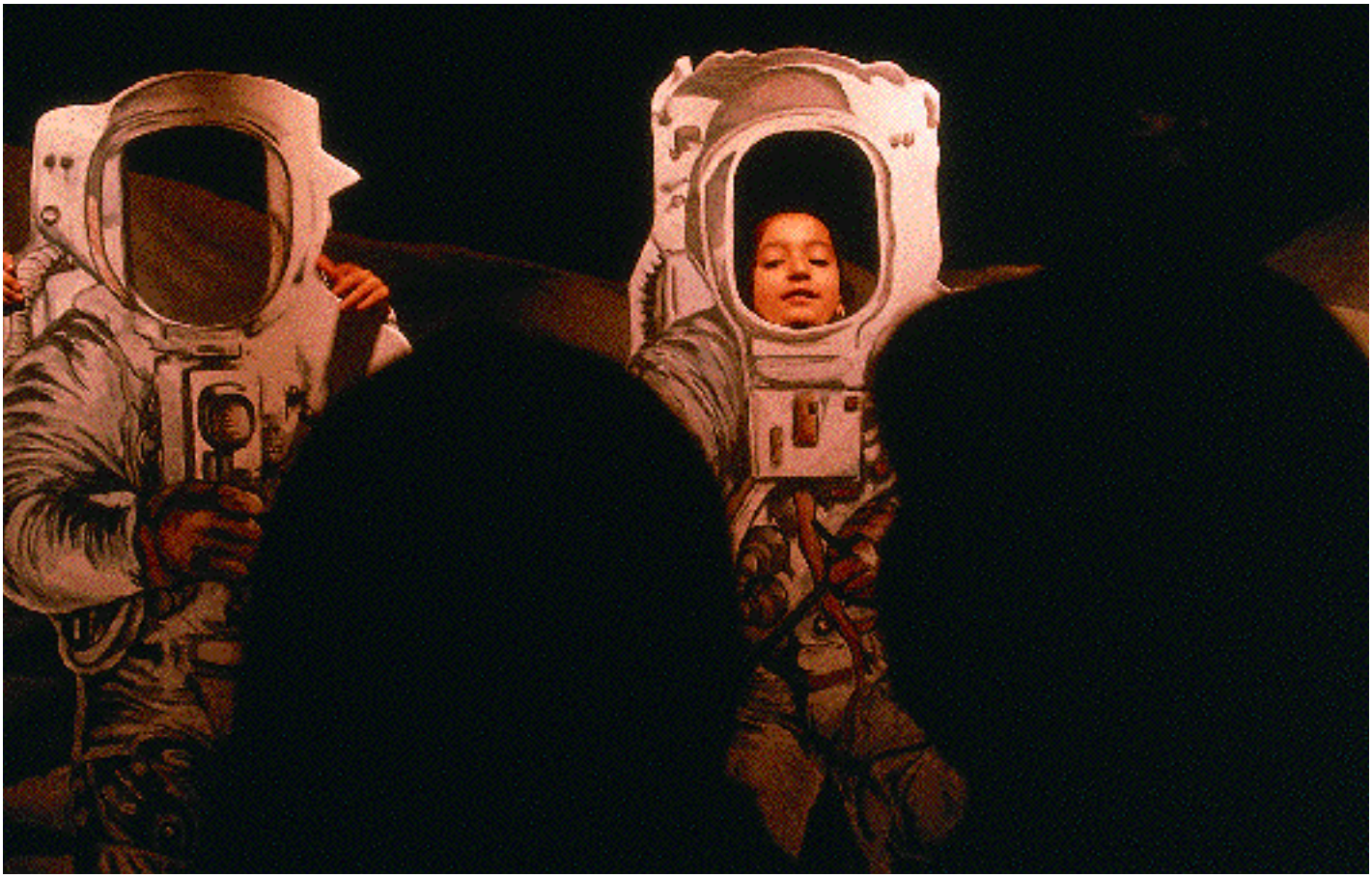

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The Science Centre Museum at Monterrey (Mexico).

be replaced by examples of the natural and cultural heritage which could be observed in their normal environment. The people who visited such museums, he thought, should be people who lived locally and were both users and preservers of the heritage that was on display.

In Europe and North America, there has been extensive experimentation with Rivière's concept of decompartmentalization. Examples include the cultural park in Molinos (Aragon), Spain, the Proud World House (showing labour conditions) in Montreal (Canada) and, in France, the ecomuseums of Margeride (rural life) in the Auvergne and on the isle of Ouessant (the marine environment).

Militant museums

The ecomuseum movement is mainly a rural one, but urban variants of ecomuseums sprang up as needy districts in big American cities awoke in the 1970s and 1980s. Neighbourhood museums were opened in poor areas of New York, Washington D.C., Chicago, Tucson and other cities. They were often in former public places, ordinary houses or sheds, and illustrated local everyday cultures, from an ethnic, working-class or crafts standpoint.

These new kinds of museums often spurred existing ones to reconsider their place in the city and in society at large. Several conventional museums, such as the Children's Museum in Indianapolis and the New York City Museum, began "outreach" activities, staging exhibitions in streets, suburbs and poor neighbourhoods on themes including drugs, violence and sexually-transmitted diseases.

In the same area as the closely-linked yellow and blue categories are two other trends which have developed in several parts of the world. The first, which appeared in the mid-1980s, might be called a "militant" trend, where the museum becomes an instrument of community development by spreading and sharing its resources. Several museums in the Sahel countries of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali have chosen this approach involving exhibits from animist culture. Their aims and actions are similar to those of European ecomuseums, Mexico's community museums and the neighbourhood museums of the United States and South Africa.

The second trend, knowledge-sharing, is found particularly in natural science and science and technology museums which seek to stimulate interest in science and to point young people towards scientific careers. There are now many technology museums and hundreds of science centres all over the world, not only in Western countries but also in India and the Far East, notably China, Japan and Indonesia.

The last two decades have been marked by profound economic changes and upheavals. In a number of countries, budgets for culture and museums have been cut back

Blockbuster exhibitions

The last two decades have been marked by profound economic changes and upheavals. In a number of countries, budgets for culture and museums have been cut back. To cope with this situation, some museums have adopted presentation and marketing techniques to raise money ►

for running costs and expansion by staging major events and adopting the profit-oriented approach of the 1980s and 1990s.

Art museums have led the field, through large exhibitions billed as exclusives or "first-evers". The trend began with the Tutankhamen exhibition in the early 1970s. All the resources of advertising and public relations are used to promote presentations of an artist's new works, of rarely-seen private or museum collections, unique treasures or exotic or extraordinary objects. These blockbuster shows cost a fortune to organize. Their purpose is to raise large amounts of cash to enable museums to repay their debts and put on new exhibitions. Nowadays museum curators are often hired for their ability to raise money or to stage shows of this kind, hopefully to turn a profit.

This trend is growing as public grants for museums and cultural bodies diminish. The appearance of museum boutiques to boost takings is also part of this business strategy.

Mourning and remembrance

A museum can also be an instrument whereby society can mourn a lost golden age and at the same time look directly at the present and the future. Through the prism of collected and exhibited objects, historical events and trends can be seen in a perspective uncluttered with morbid nostalgia.

The Scandinavians have long used museums for this purpose.A century ago, the Swedes opened the first open-air museum *(skansen)* in Stockholm to remember their traditional farming culture. They and the Norwegians are now opening labour museums and industrial ecomuseums to solemnly bury their glorious working-class and trade union history, to mark the decline or death of their major heavy industries and promote the development of modern technology.

Over the past 15 years, new museums of this kind have sprung up in many places to commemorate atrocities and major disasters that are engraved in the collective memory. Numerous institutions have opened in North America, Europe and Israel, for example, to mark the Holocaust, the Viet Nam war and other relatively recent human tragedies.

In France, many recently opened museums, such as the Memorial museums at Caen and Péronne and a number of Resistance museums, attempt to come to terms with the terrible memories of two world wars. The same kind of thing is happening in Britain and the rest of Europe. Other museums have been set up to commemorate natural disasters, such as great floods, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. These funerary monuments

New York's **Chinatown** museum

New York's Chinatown History Museum looks at the contribution of Chinese and other people, including tourists, to the growth of this Manhattan neighbourhood. It is a place of remembrance and dialogue.

The museum, which opened in 1990, is a kind of laboratory where exhibitions and activities are focused entirely on dialogue between communities. Those who run it keep their fingers on the pulse of neighbourhood problems and discuss with the public—Chinese, New Yorkers or tourists—how they might be solved. Interactive exhibitions are held to improve the lives of temporary or permanent local residents. The museum's contents raise many questions on subjects ranging from housing and demographic issues to the principles of respect and gratitude, and Chinese culture.

The museum, which is split into several locations, uses unorthodox methods. It acts as a kind of forum,stimulating discussion, helping visitors in their dealings with the authorities, highlighting little-known historical facts and demolishing, with help from the visitors, prejudices and myths that die hard,e.g.that Chinese are illegal aliens only qualified to work in restaurants and laundries, and that they lead secretive and therefore shady lives. The museum also tries to act as an intermediary between citizens and officialdom with the aim of defending the poorest people.

The Chinatown Museum keeps links with the past alive, but it is mainly concerned with the neighbourhood as it is today and with its future. Through discussion, it reckons it has carved out a role for itself that had hitherto been neglected. By its openness, it invites all New Yorkers and visitors to understand and love a living neighbourhood which is still growing. ■

30 sites added to World Heritage List

UNESCO's World Heritage Committee, which met in Kyoto from 30 November to 2 December 1998, added 30 new sites (three "natural" sites and 14 "cultural"sites) to the World Heritage List, bringing the number of listed sites of "exceptional universal value"to 582 in 114 countries, including two newcomers, Belgium and the Solomon Islands.

The committee's choice confirms its intention to preserve items of the relatively recent heritage. After Völklingen ironworks (Germany, added in 1994) and Verla groundwood and board mill (Finland,1996), three new industrial sites were chosen: Austria's Semmering railway; the four hydraulic lifts on Belgium's Canal du Centre; and the D.F. Wouda Steam Pumping Station in the Netherlands

The other new sites, with their countries, are as follows: Belgium: Flemish Béguinages; La Grand-Place, Brussels. Bolivia: the Fort of Samaipata. China: the Summer Palace, an imperial garden in Beijing; the Temple of Heaven,an imperial sacrificial altar in Beijing. Cyprus: Choirokoitia. Czech Republic: Holasovice historical village reservation; gardens and castle at Kromeríz. France:routes of Santiago de Compostela; historic site of Lyon. Germany: classical Weimar. Italy: Cilento and Vallo di Diano National Park with the archaeological sites of Paestum and Velia,and the Charterhouse of Padula; the Historic Centre of Urbino; the archaeological area and the patriarchal basilica of Aquileia. Japan:historic monuments of ancient Nara. Lebanon:Ouadi Qadisha (the Holy Valley) and the forest of the Cedars of God (Horsh Arz el-Rab). Mexico: historic monuments zone of Tlacotalpan,the archaeological zone of Paquimé, Casas Grandes. The sub-Antarctic islands of New Zealand. Portugal: prehistoric rock-art sites in the Côa Valley. Russian Federation:the Golden Mountains of Altai. Solomon Islands: East Rennell.Spain:university and historic precinct of Alcalá de Henares; the historic centre of Oviedo (extension of the churches of the kingdom of the Asturias); rock art of the Mediterranean Basin on the Iberian peninsula. Sweden: the naval port of Karlskrona. Turkey: the archaeological site of Troy. Ukraine: the historic centre of Lviv. ■

Can papers **net** a profit?

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More and more newspapers and periodicals are going online. How is electronic technology affecting the production and consumption of the printed word?

Of all the attractions, possibilities and uncertainties of the Internet, one of those raising the most speculation centres on its impact on the production, distribution and consumption of information and news. In a recent report on the future of the printed press in a digital world, Dutch media analyst Monique van Dusseldorp notes that "Newspapers as carriers of content have had to yield various functions in the past century to radio and television services,and now there are other categories of information that might migrate, this time to the net. . . . Unexpected competitors such as search engines and free homepage services, as well as the online services of television stations,now fight in the same arena for the user's attention and the limited advertising money available."

The fact is that the media cannot ignore the fast and furious pace with which use of the Internet is growing. At a conference on the electronic press held in Lyon,France,in October 1998, Randy Bennet, of the Newspaper Association of America (NAA), said that "The Internet market is expected to increase from around 150 million users worldwide today to almost 300 million by the year 2001." Surveys conducted by the American company Forrester Research forecast that worldwide online expenditure on advertising will rise from almost $2 billion today to about $15 billion in 2003. "The numbers tell us that the Internet will continue to develop as a mass medium, that advertisers will increasingly shift dollars to this medium and that traditional media will have to figure out their role in this new space," Bennet said. Miguel Angel Bastanier, director of international relations with the Spanish daily *El País*, pointed out that "every newspaper will have to be on the Internet as a service to its public and as a means of self-promotion. It cannot run the risk of seeing its readers obtain this service from its competitors."

In fact, the written press has turned to the Internet in order to stay competitive with the other online media. *American Journalism* magazine stated recently that there are 3,622 digital newspapers worldwide. A year ago, there were only some 900 outside the United States, as against 1,563 in 1998, largely as a result of the increasing number in Canada, the United Kingdom, Norway, Brazil and Germany. Yet, in spite of all the effort and investment, not a single online newspaper can be considered profitable.

The Wall Street Journal: an eloquent exception

One of the main dilemmas editors are trying to resolve lies in switching from newsprint to the computer screen and in making money without replacing the original medium, in other words without readers giving up the traditional format and changing over permanently to the electronic version.

"The important thing is not so much going on the Internet as staying on it without losing money on the printed version," says André Jaunin, founder and manager of Edicom, the Internet site of the Swiss group Edipresse, which publishes a number of newspapers and magazines including *Le Matin*, *Tribune de Genève*, *Bilan* and *Optima*. "The idea is not to display all the contents of the printed version," he says. "We consider that it is absurd to offer the newspaper we are selling on the streets free of charge on the Web. Our electronic publication is different from the printed version. The news items it contains are brief and are updated every ten minutes. They are designed to be expanded in the following day's printed edition." However, hard information is not enough. The new technologies have to be used to keep Internet readers interested. Some of the approaches which the electronic press can offer to please the public and advertisers include personalized services, free e-mail, interactive articles and opportunities to swap ideas via chat forums.

In Bennet's view, "the key to success with any new medium is a commonsense approach to serving the needs of consumers and advertisers, aided by technology, but not driven by it."

Simon Waldman, the Internet editor of the English daily newspaper *The Guardian*, described his efforts to create new products of interest to its readers. "We have designed a space on our Web page which presents cricket matches in real time, for example," he said, "and this has been extremely successful." *El País Digital*, the leading light of the Spanish electronic press with 50,000 hits a day in October 1998, had a similar success with its direct transmission of chess matches,which are particularly popular with Spaniards.

In terms of profitability, although there is no universal model or magic formula, the newspapers which have gone onto the Net try to survive primarily through subscriptions, ▶

advertising and electronic trading. However, most of them agree that surfers, who are nomadic by nature and are constantly searching, are not prepared to pay a provider to obtain their information, unless it is vital and can only be found on the Internet, which is seldom the case. Perhaps one of the most eloquent exceptions is the authoritative financial newspaper *The Wall Street Journal*, which has more than 250,000 subscribers, two-thirds of whom pay to receive only the digital version of the publication which nevertheless does not turn a profit. A large number of the electronic newspapers and news bulletins in the United States which had adopted the subscription method know all about this. They are backtracking and are trying to attract as many visitors as possible in order to sell advertising space. The free digital version of *El País* obtains its income basically from advertising, from which it hopes to make some $700,000 in 1998. Mariló Ruiz de Elvira, who is in charge of the electronic edition, explains that plans are being made for new strategies involving electronic trading, consultation of archives and other paid products and services. André Jaunin points out that, in addition to advertising, the main sources of income from Edipresse's Internet site are electronic sales of travel bookings, wine, books and music.

Although the Internet clearly offers newspapers the opportunity to achieve immediate global reach and to compete with a wide range of sources, it also obliges them to keep on updating their content, thus leaving very little time for checking. This poses another dilemma: should they be the first or the most reliable purveyor of the news? Digital newspapers exposed to financial pressure to succeed in this hard-fought market may, out of the desire to be first, fall into the temptation of transmitting unchecked information, neglecting the accuracy they have traditionally attached to information-gathering.

The virtually limitless amassing of information from a wide range of sources on the Internet may also give rise to a welter of confusion. This makes the traditional newspapers' task of rigorous selection and objectivity even more valuable. Randy Bennet believes that consumer behaviour may change as new choices and capabilities emerge, but that the need to ensure that information is accurate, to give an overview of events and to provide ready access will remain unaffected. It is for this reason that newspapers will focus on the individual and translate online the trust they have acquired over the years.

Will newsprint sink in the digital sea? Some of the predictions made are out of touch with reality. Bastenier forecasts that most newspapers will eventually disappear and that "the only survivors will be heavyweights with a sense of perspective, such as *Le Monde* or *El País*, or very small provincial papers which are close to their readership and largely provide information about and for a particular community. However, I would not let the computer screen be a substitute for the pleasure I get from reading news on paper, where I can go through the pages as I please, leaving part of the paper for later on." Although the last word has not yet been written on the subject, it is quite clear that nothing will ever be the same in the world of information since the coming of the Internet. ■

Jany Lesseur

Website of the month

http://www.unu.edu

It is a university but has no student body, faculty or campus in the traditional sense. The "faculty" of the United Nations University (UNU) is its worldwide network of scholars and its "students" are mainly young researchers and other professionals from developing countries who receive postgraduate training.

In 1969, following a proposal by the then Secretary-General U Thant, the United Nations recommended that a new type of academic institution was needed to promote scholarly international and scientific co-operation to help solve urgent global problems. Six years later UNU opened its doors.

UNU's academic work is currently carried out at its Tokyo centre and by five research and training centres and three programmes located in various parts of the world. Current priority areas of concern are development economics research, new technologies, natural resources management, biotechnology and the environment. A leadership academy opened in 1995 seeks to enhance the skills of young future leaders. Soon to start is an internship programme for postgraduate students and working people seeking jobs in the international public or private sector.

The homepage provides extensive information on all of UNU's activities, its ongoing research, conferences and seminars around the world. The UNU also produces its own academic publications and co-operates in the production of five professional journals. ■

Mobile psychology

It's easy to spot brand new owners of mobile phones from a distance. Walking down the street they grin like children who have just unwrapped the toy of their dreams. And they practically shout into the receiver, as if they have trouble imagining that their voices can be heard over such a tiny device. They are experiencing a thrilling sense of freedom. In the wink of an eye they can be in touch with anyone whenever and wherever they please.

It took a century for the fixed telephone to become a commonplace feature of everyday life in Western societies; it took a decade for the mobile phone to spread throughout the countries of both North and South. According to forecasts, the number of subscribers to one or another of the world's radiotelephony services is expected to climb from today's 275 million or so to 530 million by 2003. Right now the Scandinavian countries are in the lead. The subscription rate is 53 per cent in Finland, 47 per cent in Sweden and 44.15 per cent in Norway, followed by Japan (34.5 per cent), Italy (30 per cent) and the United States (24 per cent).

Like eyeglasses and wristwatches, the mobile phone "has joined the small circle of items that, with astonishing speed, have become an extension of the human body," wrote sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann in France's Le Monde newspaper. The mobile simultaneously reflects the changes of our times and speeds them up. It allows users to mix the professional, personal and social areas of their lives at any moment. It responds to the pervasive sense of urgency in modern societies, bestows the gift of ubiquity and, say sociologists and psychiatrists, reduces the anxiety caused by absence and loneliness.

But the portable phone is also having an impact on social behaviour. The sound of its ring is increasingly perceived as an annoyance in public places such as restaurants, cinemas, museums and trains, which are widely regarded as havens of relaxation where people can enjoy a brief respite from the fast and furious rhythm of modern life. And they create new dilemmas for users: when should they leave the phone on or off and to whom should they give their number? Do they really want their boss, mother, boyfriend or girlfriend to be able to reach them anywhere, anytime? The opening pages of the handbook of mobile psychology are only now starting to be written. ■

Writers bloc to defend their rights

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Print journalists are calling–usually in vain–for additional payment when their articles are reused in the electronic media

With Internet spreading like wildfire, authors around the world have been clamouring for protection of their copyrights. However, this has resulted in an increasingly tough battle with publishers who want writers to sign a contract giving away all rights,including electronic.

Until a few years ago, authors and journalists may not have bothered to scan through their work contracts with regard to copyrights. In fact,many magazines did not even send contracts to authors. Now both sides are careful about the mention of "copyrights" in the contract for reuse of articles and other creative work in Internet and electronic database systems.

Authors argue that print publishing is a one-time event bringing in one set of revenues, including advertisements. On the other hand, materials in electronic publications can be used repeatedly, each time potentially generating new advertisement revenues. "So we tell authors that it's a big mistake to grant permanent rights for a one-time fee," says Dan Carlinsky, vice president of the American Society of Journalists and Authors (ASJA), New York.

While some publishers are ready to pay, others maintain that once authors cede their rights they cannot claim additional payments for reuse of their material. In a case filed in 1993, a group of freelancers in New York challenged publishers and electronic reusers of published work, claiming copyright infringement. The case, better known as "Tasini Vs *The New York Times*", attracted widespread attention as this was the first new media copyright case of its sort in the United States. In 1997, a lower court ruled in favour of the publishers,saying the existing US copyright law allowed the publishers to reuse contributions "in any revision of that collection." The case has now moved to the appeals court.

"The present US copyright law does not state explicitly anything about electronic rights. Courts have just begun to consider writers' claims and there are demands to include electronic rights in the existing law," says Carlinsky.

On the other side of the Atlantic, though there are no specific regulations as yet governing the use of journalistic material in the electronic media, journalists and authors in many Western European and Scandinavian countries have reached partial or full agreements with publishers over copyrights and the Internet.

Copyright law that benefits authors

"The existing European authors' rights law is sufficient to handle the pay dispute between writers and publishers in electronic publishing. However, the system is different in Anglo-Saxon law," says Renate Schroeder, of the Brussels-based European Federation of Journalists.

The copyright law generally followed in Scandinavian countries, as well as in France and Germany, benefits the authors. When material is used again in electronic publishing, authors have the right to be consulted as to where and how it is used and to receive extra payment. For example, the leading French daily *Le Monde* entered into a two-year agreement with its staff in 1996 on electronic rights. From its annual earnings through electronic publications, it pays a percentage of its revenue from online editions and CD-ROM to all its staff members, whether or not their work has been used. "This agreement is the first of its kind in France and it is working well," says Michel Colonna d'Istria, chief of *Le Monde*'s multi-media services.

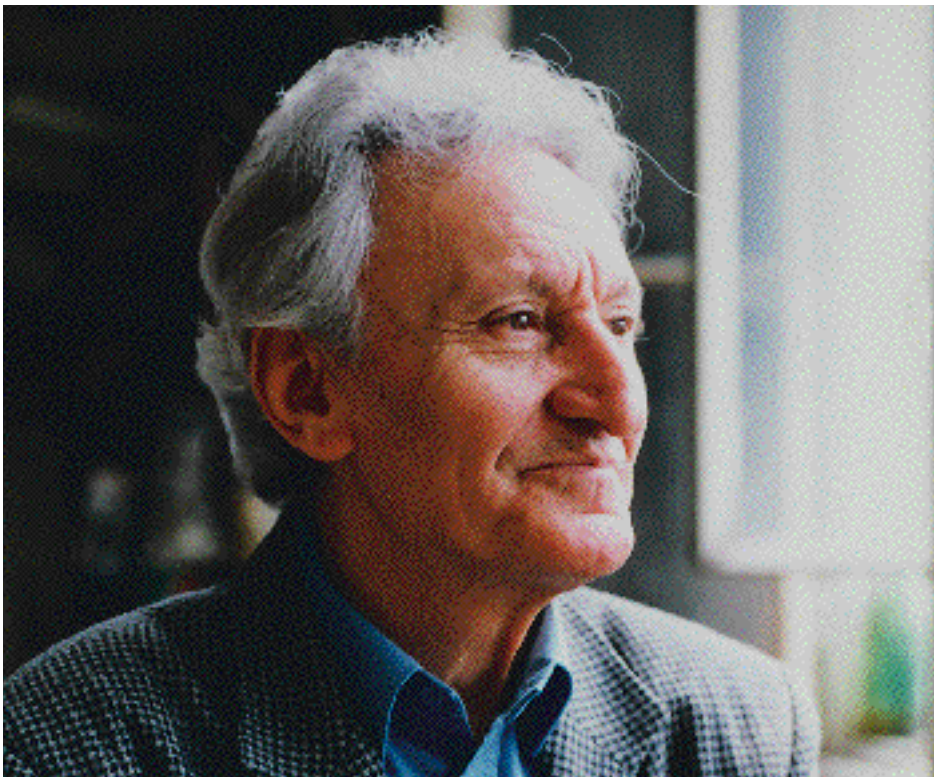
On the other hand, in the Anglo-Saxon copyright model used in the US and the UK and adapted also by the Netherlands, publishers can and do use their economic power to gain the right to reuse articles and other creative materials after making a one-off payment. Authors in these three countries claim that the present law denies the right to compensation for the reuse of their materials. In 1997, however, three Dutch journalists for the first time won a court case against the newspaper *de Volkskrant* over republication of their articles without permission on CD-ROM and the World-Wide Web.

The UK-based Jane's Information Group, publisher of Jane's defence magazines, demands all rights from authors around the world for both print and electronic editions. The magazine group maintains that its one-off fee includes all forms of delivery. "So far no one has complained," says a Jane's spokesperson.

Mike Holderness, who is active in the campaign for electronic rights in the UK for the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), says that the Anglo-American copyright system gives economic advantage to publishers and denies benefit to authors. "There is an obvious need to harmonize copyright laws within the European Union," he says.

Yordan Radichkov:

The 'Kafka of Sofia' uses the grotesque to expose the world's absurdity in short stories and plays steeped in peasant wisdom



© Ivan Bakalov

You like to say that life is a beautiful sentence full of spelling mistakes.
Human lives are sentences written with lots of love and inspiration but plenty of mistakes, and mine is no exception. However old and wise they are,people still make mistakes.

You have said that people are the rough draft of God. Would you compare God to a writer who crosses a lot of things out?
I would be wary of comparing God to anyone, especially a writer. God doesn't make mistakes,and I can't imagine myself playing the fool who would try and find them. I don't know whether God exists. If he does, so much the better. If he doesn't, it's not a tragedy.

As for people. . . . The other day, as I was drinking my coffee and listening to the radio, I looked through my window and saw a magpie looking after her babies in her nest. And I said to myself, people are like insects. They are capable of looking in different directions at the same time, keeping one eye on the outside, the other on the inside.

How do you see the world?
I'm convinced that disorder is the world's natural state.We're the ones who make the mistake of trying to set things straight. People want to organize the universe while they have enough trouble putting order into their own lives.

Do you take the world seriously?
The world already takes itself seriously enough without my putting my oar in. Everything is extremely serious down here—the committees, foundations, international organizations, political regimes—not to mention the people who give themselves airs and believe in their own greatness. But when they ride on their high horse wearing a bowler hat, they forget that all it takes is a gust of wind to blow the hat away and all their greatness with it. I hate anything that is deadly serious.

You have a marked taste for the absurd and for paradox, which are the basis of your approach to literature.
That is the only sensible approach in this boring world. At the risk of shocking you, I am convinced that humanity is bored.It is ready to be entertained at the drop of a hat. The mechanism is quite simple: just look at the Monica Lewinsky affair in the United States! People all over the world feel concerned, have got involved, have had a good laugh. I tell myself that my readers are bored and need to be entertained.So I write for them what interests and amuses me. Don't worry, my interests go beyond Lewinsky and other affairs. I am fascinated by the peasant wisdom hidden behind the apparent naivety of simple folk. It's an undercurrent in all my stories.

What do you think about current events?
News is like the fresh water that rivers pour endlessly into the ocean. It doesn't make the sea any less salty.

I have a strong feeling that the world today is heading towards a provincialization of mentalities,which are not developing at the same pace as technology. I would even say that things are moving backwards. Take the Americans again. They went to the moon,much to their credit. But they have made such a fuss over their president's high jinks that you can't help wondering whether the United States, despite all its modern technology, is not somehow becoming one of the world's remote provinces.

The remote province is one of your favourite settings. Cherkaski, for example, is a half-real, half-imaginary

the improbable Bulgarian

Bulgarian village in the middle of nowhere. Where did you get the idea for your series of books set in this village?

That was in the sixties. Bulgaria was going through a complex period, to say the least. I've always had a penchant for the grotesque. The Cherkaski that appears in my stories is the result of this combination of the complex and the grotesque. But the village really does exist. It's near my birthplace. I know it well. Many of my classmates came from there. They are incredible people. They haven't changed. In 1968 the local authorities arrested me when I went back to Cherkaski to make a movie based on my short story "The Captive Balloon".

Why were you arrested?

Because I was doing something that didn't fit in with communist party ideals. My short story was banned almost as soon as it was published, and the movie, which we managed to finish after all sorts of trials and tribulations, was banned after the first screening. The censors deemed my work a serious attack on the dignity of the Bulgarian people. At the time literature either glorified the system or it was censored. My work had to be "heroic" in order to be recognized.

It's not easy to find "irreproachable heroes" in the middle of Bulgaria—or anywhere else, for that matter.

In Bulgaria, it's not easy to survive unless you're a hero. Didn't you know that all Bulgarians are heroes? Didn't you know that we're the best? We've left all the vices to our neighbours and kept all the virtues for ourselves. We're very proud of that. But to tell the truth, I've noticed the same thing just about everywhere in the world.

You've been criticized for creating characters impervious to ideology.

At the time the authorities were incapable of such subtle analysis. One of my politically committed short stories is about a man named Gotsa Geraskov, who makes an imaginary trip to Paris and arrives there on a public holiday. Disappointed to find a city completely asleep, he turns around and heads back home almost immediately. The censors noticed neither the political dimension nor the criticism of the regime that could be read between the lines. Had I written the same short story with Moscow as the setting, there would have been a harsh reaction. Fortunately, the censors took my work literally.

Your work is steeped in the supernatural. Is that because it was necessary to use coded language under the Zhivkov regime or was it a form of aesthetic experimentation? Would you have written the same way in a democracy?

I don't like to express myself directly. Granted, I have worked a bit like Aesop or La Fontaine, but I would have written the same thing in the same way under any political system. Some critics have said that I have drawn a great deal of inspiration from Bulgarian folklore. It's true that all my writing bears the imprint of the region where I was born. But it's also true that in the past what I wrote wasn't always understood in Bulgaria. Sometimes the critics were hard on me. My work didn't meet with full acceptance until Gabriel García Márquez's books were translated.

Your work has often been compared with his. Are you flattered or annoyed by that?

I'm not the least bit bothered by it. Critics often compare writers when they don't know what else to say.

But García Márquez's fiction is not peopled with the same kind of supernatural beings as the tenets and verbludes that appear in your work. Did you invent these creatures or did you borrow them from Bulgarian folklore?

The *verblude* came straight out of my imagination, but the *tenets* is a creature that appears in Bulgarian folk tales. The name may derive from the Russian word *tem*, which means shadow. An old belief has it that if a cat hops over a corpse, the soul of the deceased will never go to heaven. It will remain earthbound and become a kind of vampire. But vampires are a Romanian speciality. Our *tenets* are much nicer. Not only do they not drink blood, but they can actually make themselves quite useful. They play a positive role. One *tenets* is said to have finished weaving the rug of a woman who had fallen ill. Another typed a short story on my typewriter.

Maybe you don't believe in them, but the people who live in my region do. One day, in the village where my mother was born, I asked an old woman if she had seen a *tenets* lately. She answered, "Oh no, we haven't seen any around here for ages, but ▶

People are like insects. They are capable of looking in different directions at the same time, keeping one eye on the outside, the other on the inside.

the other day they were talking about them on the radio." In fact, she was referring to a broadcast of one of my stories!

The inhabitants of Cherkaski are totally cut off from the outside world. For them, nothing is more exotic than Romania, on the opposite bank of the Danube, where they have never been. Have their lives changed since the fall of the Berlin Wall?

Very much so. Television has arrived in the remotest corners of the province. It has broadened horizons,stirred new interests and kindled new desires. A while ago I visited my cousins in a small town near Cherkaski. Their house was empty. As usual, neighbours appeared to tell me they weren't there. "Where've they gone?" I asked. I was surprised because my cousins are getting on in years and usually at least one old grandma was always home. "They all went off to the municipal reading room," was the answer, "to see a strip show."

You couldn't say the change has not been drastic! But that's not all. Modernity has totally transformed my village. It's been swallowed up and wiped off the map by a dam! It's as if it was intended to give me ideas for my stories. The march Westward continues, as you might imagine: the names of towns were changed almost as soon as Zhivkov fell because, as everyone knows, changes of that kind are essential. For example, the regional capital, Mihaïlovgrad, has become Montana, just like the American state. The town's name has been changed so often no one knows what to call it any more. Once it was called Kutlovitsa. You have to admit, the name has a "barbarian" ring to it. One day at the turn of the century, a bearded man drove through the town in a car. The rumour immediately spread that he was King Ferdinand of Bulgaria in person. The village worthies called a meeting and wrote a petition requesting the National Assembly to change the name of the village to "Ferdinand's Kutlovitsa". It sounded much more stylish!

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"Didn't you know that all Bulgarians are heroes?"

How has Bulgaria changed? Where do you think the country is heading?

For a very long time I saw Bulgaria as a white bear floating on an iceberg, all alone in the middle of the ocean. We haven't come down off the iceberg in the past few years, but at least we pass other bears and wave to each other. Soon we won't be alone any more. I think we're on the right track. We're no longer cut off and the world looks at us in a different way. I have high hopes for the future.

But Bulgaria still has problems, especially

Bulgaria

Area : 111,000 km²
Population : 8,726,000

Historical landmarks
14th-19th centuries: Ottoman occupation.
1878: Bulgaria becomes independent after the Russo-Turkish war.
1912: During the first Balkan war, Bulgaria fights with Greece, Serbia and Montenegro against the Ottoman empire.
1913: Unhappy about the post-war settlement, Bulgaria turns against its former allies but is defeated.
1914-1918: Bulgaria joins the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary), i.e. the defeated side.
1941-1944: Bulgaria fights on the side of the Reich and occupies part of Greece and Yugoslavia.
September 1944:The communists assume power.
1954-1989: Rule of Todor Zhivkov.
10 November 1989: Todor Zhivkov is removed from power after a palace revolution supported by Moscow.
November 1991:The Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) comes to power.
January 1995:The neo-communists, under the name of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, return to power.
February 1997:The UDF again replaces the socialists.

Economic data
Bulgaria was essentially rural before 1944. During the communist period it specialized in the mechanical, electronic, chemical and food industries. After the fall of communism, more than half the population fell below the poverty line. It was not until 1997 that signs of improvement began to appear.
GNP: $1,140 per capita (1997), almost half the 1990 figure. ■

economic ones. What is life like there?
I'm going to paraphrase a line from a short story by Maupassant which goes something like this, "How lucky we are to die surrounded by doctors in white coats!"

Your political commitment came late and seems paradoxical. You were invited to the "dissidents' breakfast" with French President François Mitterrand in 1989, but were elected to the National Assembly as a socialist deputy during the first free elections two years later.
At that time Ceausescu had just been killed and Bulgaria was on the same track as Romania. It looked as if it might drown in a bloodbath. I belonged to a group of intellectuals who thought that if we rallied around the socialist party, we might be able to channel the tension rising in the streets. The French socialists had something to do with that decision. I don't regret the experience, but I do consider it a mistake. That said, I never set foot in parliament and resigned.

Have these historic changes influenced your work?
No, but they have certainly influenced literature in general. First of all they rid Bulgarian literature of the burden of "glorification" I mentioned earlier. Authors can express themselves more freely. Has the quality of literature improved? I'm not sure.

Has opening up to the world given rise to new literary trends in Bulgaria?
Yes, especially with young authors. But again, permit me to voice some doubts on the quality of the results. I'm not against influences that could be fruitful but, as Maupassant said,the best belly-dancing is done in the Orient. I don't like pseudo-innovations. Call me old-fashioned, but I miss the days when 80,000 copies of a novel by Victor Hugo were published in Bulgaria and all of them sold out! That's saying a lot for a country with a population of eight million. There was a tradition of reading which is dying out nowadays. As I said, Bulgaria's famous reading rooms, which have been around since the nineteenth century, are being turned into nightclubs.

Pain is the same for everyone and doesn't discriminate between races and peoples. It makes everyone equal

Many young Bulgarians have emigrated or are thinking of doing so because of the country's severe economic and moral crisis. Do you have a message for them?
I would be tempted to advise them to stay at home.There's no place like home.But I am wary of persuading or dissuading anyone.I can only speak for myself. In my view, people must draw water from their own wells. The French have their wells,the Germans have theirs,even if they draw beer from them. . . .And I think everyone should do the same. Look at wild animals. Wherever they roam, they always go back to their lairs. Salmon swim to the Sargasso Sea to die. Birds return home no matter how far they may have migrated. Can you imagine that a little bird can be wiser than a human being?

In view of the tragedies afflicting the Balkans, do you think Balkan writers have a special role to play?
Writers can decide to defend a cause through their work, or they can do the opposite.It's a personal choice. I don't have any advice to give on that because, as we say back home, "if you want to do somebody harm, then give them advice." In the end, everything depends on the context of space and time.There might be places in the world where writers may not feel the need to become involved. I think that's impossible in the Balkans. In Bulgaria, writers have always been associated with every social, political, religious and, of course, cultural movement.

Is it possible to imagine Balkan writers getting together to re-establish the long-severed links between their countries? ►

"I am convinced that humanity is bored."

© Roumiana Ougartchinska Vincenti, Paris

Writers in the Balkans are divided by tradition. The peoples of the region have more or less conflictual relationships. Each writer stays in his or her camp. That doesn't mean there isn't a certain intellectual solidarity. For example, one of my plays banned in Bulgaria was first performed in the Republic of Macedonia in 1988. With few exceptions, writers have done nothing to aggravate conflicts but they haven't done anything to alleviate them either. Macedonian and Greek intellectuals have drawn closer together in the past few years—which to me seems like the most sensible thing to do—but I don't know of any other similar initiatives. I have taken part in a grand total of two meetings between Balkan writers, and I don't remember them as being particularly cordial.

In a way, that reflects the situation in Europe. I understand Americans who wonder how so many different peoples and languages can exist in such a small space. The fragmentation of Europe is even more marked in the Balkans.

But the trend in Europe is towards unification. . . . The Portuguese writer Miguel Torga said, "Universality is locality without walls." What do you think of that?

I would say the same thing myself. You see, Sofia is located on the London-Calcutta axis. Once, it was on the Silk Route. This geographic location has given the city a sense of openness, even though Bulgaria has often been isolated since the fifteenth century. Another route that crosses Sofia—and to me it's just as important as routes taken by people—is the route taken by migrating birds. It's known as "the grand route of Aristotle". The universal core of Bulgaria is to be found at the crossroads of these two routes.

If you had to define universality in one word, what would you say?

I would say: pain. As a writer, I am very sensitive to human pain. It makes people equal. Pain is the same for everyone and doesn't discriminate between races and peoples. It makes everyone equal. The English have a highly developed sense of humour, but that doesn't mean they feel less pain than anyone else when they have their teeth extracted. ■

A **prolific** writer

Yordan Radichkov was born in 1929 at Kalimanitsi, a village in northeastern Bulgaria which is today submerged beneath the waters behind a dam.

He has been a provincial newspaper correspondent, a scriptwriter with the national cinema studios and a staff writer on several literary magazines.

In 1989 he was invited to a "dissidents' breakfast" by French President François Mitterrand, but two years later was elected as a member of the Bulgarian parliament on a socialist ticket (see box p. 48). Disenchanted by his experience of politics, he soon resigned and once again became a full-time writer.

His literary career began in 1959 with the publication of a collection of short stories and since then he has written some 40 books. In 1971 he won the Dimitrov Prize for Literature, one of Bulgaria's leading literary awards. He has also received many prizes from other countries, including, in 1984, the prestigious Grinzane Cavour Prize for the best foreign book published in Italy.

He has a notable following in the Scandinavian countries and in Italy, and has published over a hundred titles in foreign languages. ■

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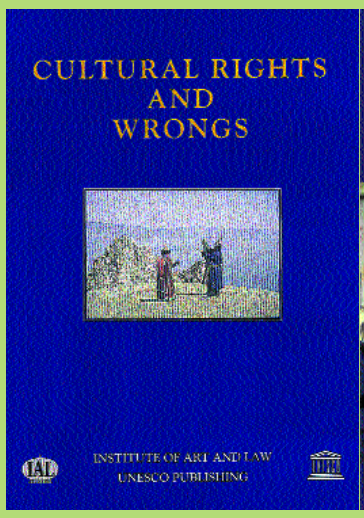

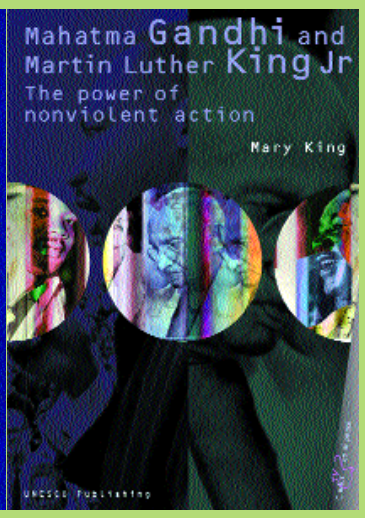

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